Private Life of Louis XIV

by

Louis Bertrand

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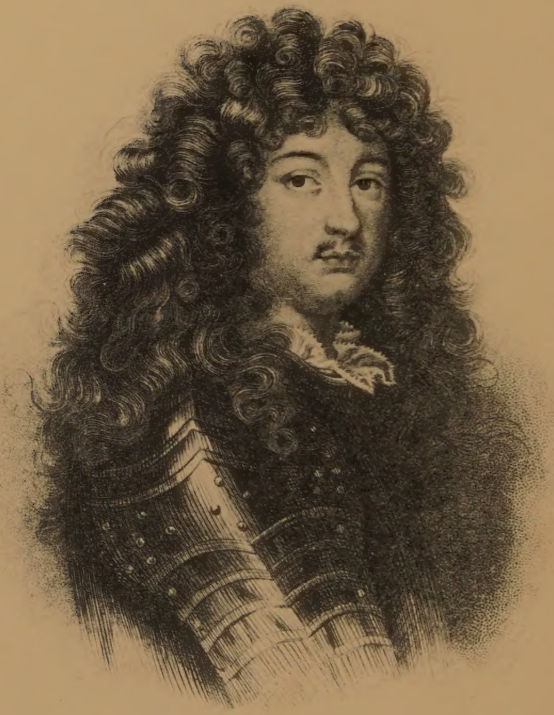

Love Lives of the Great

THE PRIVATE LIFE OF LOUIS XIV

By LOUIS BERTRAND
OF THE FRENCH ACADEMY
Translated by PAUL MORIN

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PREFATORY NOTE

LOUIS XIV was a great lover.

His achievements for France are perhaps forgotten, but his loves will ever be remembered, a little too easily. Forgetful of everything except his amours and his mistresses, the popular fancy inevitably pictures him in the arms of a La Vallière or a Montespan.

It must be admitted that he himself has contributed much towards the establishment of this questionable reputation. Saint-Simon, after relating all that he had seen, or thought he had seen, of the reign of Louis XIV, closes his narrative with this sentence: " Had he been born a commoner, he would none the less have had a gift for feasts and entertainments, gallantry and *inordinate love affairs*." And the King, could he have read those lines, would not have been likely to contradict his historian. True, the love affairs in which he indulged were far from being of the " inordinate " character to which Saint-Simon exaggerates them. Essentially a ruler, he loathed all disorder, including that which is the result of licentious-

ness. On the other hand, to be known as a rakehell and a merry blade was then " the thing ", and he wished to be considered capable of holding his own with the " sparks " of his time. A loveless man was an enigma to the contemporaries of Mme de Rambouillet and the frequenters of the Blue Salon. For the *précieux* and the *précieuses,* love was a religion; and this mystico-literary religion still had many disciples when Louis XIV was a youth. In fact, the nation expected its king to follow the example of such philanderers as François I, or Henri II or Henri IV — Henri IV, that most beloved of sovereigns, whose robust attributes won him the unequivocal nickname of *le Vert-Galant,* the Gallant Greybeard!

To tell the truth, Louis XIV had little need to do violence to his own character in order to fulfill the national wish. He was constituted to enjoy and to inspire love. Glory itself he loved as a man loves his mistress. We find in his *Memoirs* this extraordinary and, as yet, too little known sentence, which he wrote — or dictated — with a perfection of form and a depth of thought worthy of a great writer: " *The niceties and, I venture to say, the timid shyness of the most tender passions are to be found also in the love of glory.*"

Such being the case, is it to be wondered at that he was taken at his word and judged ac-

cording to the appearances which he countenanced with such complacency? Countless novels were written in his lifetime, around his amours and his mistresses — productions half licentious and half satirical, in which slander and calumny rank equally with fancy and imagination. The theatrical works of the period were replete with allusions to the amorous monarch. Beginning with Racine's tragedies, he is the hero of all the dramatic plays of his day. Simultaneously, German, English and Dutch pamphleteers started to spread mythical accounts of lewdness and debauchery, the purpose of which was to disgrace and bring shame upon the King. Historical truth, of course, held but little place in these writings, though they ofttimes assumed the guise of unbiassed history. And finally, at a later date, fastidious scholars of the 19th century endeavoured to exhaust this subject of the amours of Louis XIV. What has not been written about him and his mistresses? If the number, rather than the authenticity, of these works were any criterion we might well believe that we are fully informed. We read the birth and marriage certificates of the royal favourites. We are shown an inventory of their wardrobe, and we know, within a dozen or so, how many shirts they owned. . . But we know not at all, or scarcely at all, how they

loved and, particularly, how they were loved. Paradoxical as such an assertion may appear, few historical enigmas are more difficult to fathom than the amours of Louis XIV.

This proceeds, above all, from the King's unparalleled secretiveness. He was, I believe, secretive from the day of his birth, but he became more and more so as he advanced in years. It seems likely that it was he who ordered the destruction of his letters to his mistresses. Contrary to the general belief Louis XIV wrote abundantly. Like his great-grandfather, Philip II of Spain, he was an office man. He spent his life annotating reports and correspondence, dictating or drawing up letters. His amorous epistles were undoubtedly numerous. His passionate declarations to Marie Mancini would have filled volumes, and we know that Colbert was often entrusted with the delivery of his master's letters to the Duchesse de La Vallière or the Marquise de Montespan. Mme de Maintenon also received from him many letters which she burned when she took refuge at Saint-Cyr. . . Was it, then, the King himself who requested or forced his mistresses and his consort to destroy his intimate or amorous correspondence? This is not impossible, and quite to be expected from one whose every thought was so hidden and wilfully mysterious that History tells us of no

man whose inner feelings were more relentlessly shielded from an inquisitive world.

He made it his constant aim to leave behind him naught but an heroic image. He wished to be deemed above all ordinary human passions and, when he gave way to those of love, he was anxious to dominate them and to appear superior to them. He even went so far as to write such splendid sentences as the following, in which pride gives way to a lofty comprehension of the duties and responsibilities of kings: " *Holding in this world a wholly divine office, we must appear incapable of any emotions which might debase it. But, if it be true that, unable to belie the weakness of its nature, our heart still feels involuntarily such low emotions, our reason must at least hide them, as soon as they become prejudicial to the public weal, for which alone we have been born.*"

No one has put into practice with more care that stoic maxim which was Flaubert's first moral rule: " Hide thy life! " But he would have said " Hide thy soul! " He was a classicist. Spurning the brazen self-display of the romanticists, he endeavoured to reveal nothing but his most nobly human qualities. He would have wished that nothing remain to recall him to the mind of man but medals and statues, frescoes or paintings, poems or lapi-

dary inscriptions, such as remind us of the heroes of antiquity or the gods of mythology. In fact, this secret wish of the Great King has been all but granted. Amazingly, indeed, this man — constantly in the glare of " that fierce light which beats upon a throne ", hounded by gazetteers and pamphleteers, the prey of historians — this man whose pitiful human shell has been pried into by all the indiscretions of medicine and petty erudition — so cleverly avoided the searching gaze of the public that we know nothing of his inner life, of his personal and secret thoughts. Compared to his, the soul of a Napoleon is a transparent crystal. In Louis XIV, it would seem that the Man has been annihilated by the King. In the eyes of posterity, he subsists outwardly in the form of a domineering and haughty silhouette, of a bronze or marble equestrian figure, with staff upheld and laurel-wreathed brow. This, in itself, is a colossal attainment which left a deep mark upon the mentality of France. But his soul is more enigmatic, more darkly walled in mystery, than a Pharaoh's mummy in its granite sarcophagus, in the silent corridors of the hypogeum.

We chafe at this very mysteriousness. We would know this impenetrable man and, above all, understand his most intimate aspect — that of the lover. His amours have been

widely discussed; yet, in a truly historical way, we are acquainted with but few positive facts. All the rest is mere romance, material incidents of tragedies of which the inner psychological meaning all but escapes us and the significance remains forever concealed. At best, we can but attempt to fathom the man and the lover by explaining the King. It is in the sovereign, the builder of modern France, the organiser of monarchical pomp and circumstance, in short, Louis XIV the Leader, that we may find the passionate lover, for in love alone does man reveal himself. All his qualities and faculties are brought into play, he sets them forth and, peacock-wise, struts before the object of his love. He lays at her feet all the treasures of his soul. In turn, these sentimental riches, these faculties, transfigured and exalted by love, react upon it and give to it its particular complexion, its peculiar hue and accent.

The quality of one's love depends upon the quality of one's soul. However mysterious be the soul of Louis XIV, it is impossible that there could have been any violent contradiction between the monarch and the lover. This king must have loved in a kingly way. This hero must have loved heroically.

Let us then, with broad strokes, depict this Son of France — body and soul — and recall what physical charms, what delicacy of feel-

ing, what qualities of the heart, the will and the mind he brought to his mistresses. And afterwards, the better to understand the lover, and then the sentimental friend which he became at the end, we shall follow him from the first stammerings of his calf-love for Marie Mancini to the days when, as a melancholy old man, he murmured confidences and shed tears beside Mme de Maintenon's spinning-wheel.

✣

And now, was this great lover fair to look upon?

In this matter, opinions are divided, not to say contradictory, albeit reconcilable.

La Grande Mademoiselle, for instance, said of Louis XIV, her cousin: " He is the handsomest man in his kingdom and, surely, in all others. . . On the other hand, Primi Visconti writes in his *Memoirs:* " The King is not handsome, but his features are regular. He is pock-marked. His eyes are large, and by turns haughty, eager, roguish, voluptuous and tender. He is of commanding appearance and, as the saying goes, has a kingly carriage."

From these two quotations — and they are confirmed by most of the countless portraits of the King — we gather that his face, seamed with small-pox, his features, regular but heavy, his round cheek-bones and prominent chin, did

not combine to make what is commonly called a handsome man, but that his general appearance was both impressive and striking. First of all, he was a vigorous human animal, ardently sensual and obviously constituted for loving women and attracting their love. He sought pleasure and voluptuousness with a true Southerner's tenacity. It must not be forgotten that he was Spanish by his mother and Italian by his grandmother, Maria de' Medici. To that must be added his liking for physical exercise, riding, hunting and strenuous sport. He loved the country and the open air and only found happiness in his gardens and his parks, his woods and great demesne forests of Compiègne, Saint-Germain, Marly, and Fontainebleau. One pictures him as constantly aloof, in state, in the ceremonious drawing-rooms of Versailles. Nothing could be farther from the truth. As much as circumstances allowed, Louis XIV was an out-of-doors monarch. One might say that he aerated and ventilated both court and monarchy by emptying the dismal and sombre Louvre of his day and flinging its lordly occupants into the very arms of Nature. Most of his life he spent in rural surroundings, to such an extent that his critics, and the Parisians in particular, feeling wronged by the absence of the Court, styled him " the country gentleman " and the

rumour spread that " the quality ", at Versailles, had lost their noble ways and become boors and clodhoppers.

Such censure was not without an element of truth. At the time of his first youth and adolescence, the King was a stoutish lad, rather awkward and shy, and interested chiefly in horses and dogs, parades and glittering uniforms. But he was a born master of men, and he soon acquired polish, for he deemed it necessary to a sovereign's calling. The lout became an incomparable dancer. " He dances divinely! " exclaims the *Grande Mademoiselle*, his cousin. The shy youngster learned stage presence and ballet steps. He appeared and spoke in public with assurance and eloquence. By dint of hard work and self-mastery, this clumsy man succeeded in giving the impression of innate gracefulness, and at the same time charming everybody by his exquisite elegance and politeness. Before long, he could give the impression of majesty personified, and assume, in the words of Primi Visconti, " a truly royal manner " which, at first, was contrary to his nature. He made himself over, body and soul.

Like all strong natures, he was born kind, generous, trusting. With his servants he was not only humane but even familiar, and the lower classes found him debonair and easy of

approach. A story is told of a certain farrier from Salon, in Provence, who came to Versailles commissioned, as he said, to deliver a mysterious message to the King. Incredulous at first, the monarch finally sent for him. Repeated audiences took place in his study. The man was listened to with great attention and kindness, and sent home with his travelling expenses paid and a handsome gift to boot. The secretiveness of Louis XIV was such that the purpose of the farrier's errand was never disclosed. Again, each year, on the feast of Saint Louis, a peasant from Versailles brought him a nosegay and the customary anniversary compliments. The king would accept the bouquet, speak a few pleasant words and have a purse of gold given to the simple fellow.

Kindly by nature — Saint-Simon himself admits it — he was also of an acute and almost morbid sensitiveness. He was easily moved, and wept at the slightest emotion. Like Racine, and perhaps more so, he had the gift of tears, and one might well apply to him these charming lines of Sainte-Beuve:

The famous poet, Jean Racine,
So full of love and piety,
When his poetic lyre had been
In silence veiled that none might see,

Bent down in prayer, as fain he must,
And laid his urn upon the dust,
Beside the Good Lord's feet, and wept. . . .

He wept like exile far away,
For him, to mourn brought sweet relief
The day that died in tears of grief,
Or La Fontaine or Champmeslé. . . .

A sensitiveness similar to this existed in the King. Countless instances confirm it. No one has ever felt more deeply than Louis XIV the anguish and bitterness of partings. He sobbed and shed copious tears when some princess set out for a far distant throne, a remote, gloomy and fearful court, or toward a sinister or repulsive husband. His tender heart feared to cause sorrow — his contemporaries expressly say so. And that is a capital point in love.

Lastly, to compensate for this excessive sensitiveness, the King, in his early youth especially, was subject to fits of furious anger. By dint of will-power and of self-mastery, he succeeded in curbing these excesses. Reason prevailed over wrath. He learned to keep his temper and hold his tears in check, to curb his heart and overcome love itself. Twenty-four hours sufficed him to break off with a mistress in a fair way of becoming tyrannical or wearisome. He expected love to be but a diversion

between two royal tasks, and believed that he could say:

Je suis maître de moi comme de l'univers.
[*I am master of myself, as of the universe.*]

At all events, he wished to be held superior, not only to passion, but also to physical ailments and pain. He bore with admirable fortitude the most painful surgical operations and the ruthless treatments prescribed by his physicians. Scarcely convalescent from illness or an operation, he would appear in public, in the belief that the peace of the State required it. A King has no right to be ill. He wished to impress upon his subjects that sickness and fatigue could not overtake him. In the mind of the people, he even ruled the elements. Primi Visconti writes in all earnestness that it stopped raining if the King went out of doors. Fair weather was brought back by his mere appearance!

Thus did Louis XIV spend his life in unceasing self-regulation and in a constant bridling of his thoughts and feelings. He was a true hero of the will. But his will was not merely heroic, it had also a touch of genius, inasmuch as it based itself on common-sense — which is rather unusual — and, to the highest degree, was inspired by moderation and an instinctive comprehension of realities and potentialities.

So much stress has been laid upon the more commonplace qualities of Louis XIV that his really superior qualities have been forgotten. The genius has been eclipsed by the sensible man. In addition to being a realist and an unparalleled leader, he had, in truth, an inspiring and creative intellect of the highest order.

What moralist of his century ever had a deeper and shrewder understanding of human nature than this sovereign, who felt it his duty *to know all,* to be familiar with every event at home and abroad, who perused with a true dilettante's curiosity the love-letters and all the other documents delivered over to him by his secret police, and deciphered them with as much pleasure as would a novelist of to-day? What tragedy of Racine's, what depicting of passions, could astonish this man who lived in the midst of the most stirring dramas, who rubbed elbows constantly with poisoners and murderers — and was aware of it? In comparison with reality, the ruffians and conspirators of the stage must have appeared to him as paltry puppets.

To this positive and accurate understanding of life, the King added that gift of inspiration which is, so to speak, a superior form of invention. So perfect an inspirer, so dazzling a creator was he that even a Balzac, attempting to picture a super-type of autocrat and leader,

could not have conceived a character like him. It is only fair to remember what Louis XIV has added to the image of traditional monarchy and to recall also his conscious accomplishments. He who contrived Versailles, its Court, monarchial pomp, settings and luxurious festivities — who brought to royalty a prestige unknown until then, and had such a wide and lofty consciousness of his functions, duties and responsibilities, and of the great work he was called to perform — who conceived France as a land of beauty, happiness and military and intellectual glory — who, in a word, saw himself as an earthly god, and expressed these sublime conceits in a style and with accents worthy of Bossuet — was a very great man and a genius.

Thus conscious of his worth and merits, and knowing that he was the supreme master — and a master beloved of his subjects, — it is obvious that Louis XIV must have been a most unusual wooer. Even when most deeply in love — a not infrequent occurrence — he could not forget what a gift he brought to his mistresses when he gave himself. Even had he wished to be only a lover, he still remained the King — a king who dreamed of being a hero. He knew well enough — in his own words — that his mistresses would have loved him less had he not had all these qualities

and ambitions. But being as he was, he could not be a mere flesh-haunted Don Juan. To be in love with women and love was all very well, but he had something else to do, and he wished to carry on gloriously with what he himself called " the business of being a king ". He had neither the time nor the right to love like other men, for the object of his love was loftier than Love. . .

I

THE LOVER

LOUIS XIV, needless to say, only attained gradually to this consciousness of self, of his worth, of what he stood for. To be in love was the fashion, and he followed it in common with every one else, for seldom does an adolescent or a young man love by nature. Love — by which I do not mean sensuality — often is for him nothing but a matter of mimicry. Sincere as his passion may be, its ingenuousness is never free from a certain studied attitude before himself and the lady of his heart — an attitude regulated by the literature and fashion of the day. Thus, the loves of Louis XIV took pattern upon the code of gallantry decreed by the *précieuses*.

A list of his conquests is easy to make. Names are copiously supplied by Court gossip, and many scholars have drawn up the Don Juanesque catalogue. The Comtesse de Beauvais — this " Cateau " who is reputed to have opened the youthful eyes of the King to the attractions of love, Mlle de la Mothe-Houdancourt, Olympe Mancini, her sister Marie, Mlle

de La Vallière, Mme de Montespan, Mlle de Théobon, Mme de Monaco, Mme de Soubise, Mlle de Ludres, Mlle de Fontange . . . and this enumeration could easily be continued.

With the exception of four or five of these ladies, it is impossible to affirm that they were actually the King's mistresses. It is beyond doubt that they were selected for the royal favour, but nobody can say with what warmth that favour was extended. So, leaving aside passing fancies and caprices, let us come straight to the point.

It seems certain that only two women really possessed the heart of Louis XIV: Marie Mancini and Louise de La Vallière, and the latter in less degree than the former. This second passion was nothing more than a revival and continuation of the first. Strictly speaking, one could maintain that Marie Mancini was the King's first and only love.

It began in the month of December of the year 1656. Louis XIV was then eighteen years old. Marie Mancini was a little younger. Theirs was a very literary communion. Together they read the novels and tragedies in vogue. Billets-doux and trifling attentions were exchanged and lengthy epistles written, in imitation of the heroes of *Cyrus* and *Clélie*.

Marie Mancini tells us, in her memoirs, that the King wrote whole volumes to her when she was at Brouage:

" His Majesty's sole concern was to despatch couriers to me, each one bearing five letters of many pages." Entire nights were spent walking in the moonlight and worshipping one another. They rode together through the woods or on the highways. It was a juvenile passion, very romantic, and already passably artificial and vainglorious, but which nevertheless grew constantly more intense, while remaining quite platonic, as the gallant fashion of the day prescribed.

At that time, the King was a vigorous young man, of slightly heavy features, but whose eyes were as fine as could be found anywhere. Among the multitude of royal portraits of that period, which extends from 1655 to about 1665, there are two that seem especially illuminating.

The first, of definitely realistic treatment, is a large full-length portrait belonging to the Duc de Vendôme. The young prince is in war kit, spurred, and wearing heavy funnel-shaped boots. His long buff-leather surcoat reaches to his knees and is belted with a white scarf. Holding the staff of command in his right hand, he points with his left to a painting, half hidden by a tapestry, which depicts a bat-

tle scene or the taking of a town — the battle of the Dunes, the taking of Stenay or Montmédy. The general style of this composition is austere. The King's face is stern. He appears preoccupied, not to say anxious. We already see in him the statesman and the leader of armies, the positive and methodical intelligence, destined to master the mind and heart even in the paroxysm of amorous passion.

The second portrait is the famous bust by Bernini, a lyrical and somewhat grandiloquent work. While doubtless over-idealizing the King's physiognomy, it expresses nevertheless with peculiar power the soul of Louis XIV at that stage of his destiny.

His profile, which strangely recalls to mind that of Bonaparte at the same age, is fearless and domineering. His eyes, staring at some clearly visioned and enchanting goal, smoulder with dreams of glory. The strong curve of his forehead, the arcs of his Olympian eyebrows, indicate a thousand glorious dreams. But his face expresses quite different things: his rather thick lips betray a greedy sensuality and seem to thirst for kisses; his nostrils quiver; his eyes swim in languour and their orbits are darkened by a voluptuous lassitude. His entire face reveals a weariness close to pain, together with an unappeasable desire. No other portrait has attained to a more perfect psycho-

logical truthfulness nor disclosed more clearly the youthful lover of Marie Mancini and Louise de La Vallière.

As for Mazarin's niece Marie, this young Italian maiden who so promptly became acclimatized to France, of her also we have many more or less truthful likenesses. Despite the compulsory flattery of her portraits, one sees readily that she was not beautiful. This, moreover, we are plainly told by most of her contemporaries. One of the anonymous authors of *La France Galante* bluntly writes that she looked like a tavern scullion, a publican's fat and ugly daughter, swarthy, shrill and foul-mouthed. This is, of course, mere pamphleteer's talk, but Mme de La Fayette, a keenly observing mind, turns out to be no less severe. She writes: " Mlle de Mancini had no beauty whatever. Her person had no charm, and her mind but very little, although she had infinite cleverness. She was daring and resolute, hot-headed and wanton, and devoid of all politeness and civility. . ."

A time came, for all that, when this unpleasant and ill-favoured person acquired finally a sort of seductive beauty, and that was when the King's love succeeded in transfiguring her. The Court witnessed a veritable metamorphosis of the " barmaid ". This fleeting moment seems to have been caught by

Mignard's brush in his portrait of Marie Mancini, now in the Berlin Museum. It shows the face of a roguish child, a small mouth, a diminutive turned-up nose, eyes like black diamonds, and magnificent brown hair, artlessly parted in the middle and waved. Her only ornaments are a string of pearls and pearl ear-rings. . . The little girl looks prodigiously sly and intelligent, and it must be admitted that, at that time at least, she was charming.

The King, therefore, showed sound taste when he chose her. He had seen her for the first time when calling to inquire about Madame Mancini, sister of the Cardinal and mother of Marie. Suffering from a serious malady, this lady was dying, at the Louvre, in one of the chambers on the second floor. To reach her quarters, the King had to walk through Marie's room. Thus did these two young people meet, speak and attract one another. But, before it could unfold itself like a flower, this love, born in the attic of an ancient palace and at the bedside of a moribund woman, needed the country air and the freedom of the vast royal forests and parks — Compiègne, Vincennes, Fontainebleau. . .

At Vincennes, the Cardinal had built for himself a country-seat, in the sumptuous style of the Italian villas. To-day, abominably

soiled and defiled by the military administration, this palace is in a wretched state of ruin, but a magnificent stair-well entirely wainscotted with mirrors (which later was imitated at Versailles), frescoed ceilings, and stately panelling, wood-work and panel-friezes still claim our admiration. Its bright and cheerful rooms, the clever arrangement of its apartments, its thoroughly modern aspect are especially striking. After the dark and gloomy Louvre, this must have made a happy impression upon the adolescent Louis XIV. And Marie Mancini, who also was modern in all her ways, like her uncle's house, strongly suggested brightness, youth and novelty. In the eyes of the King, she was the nymph of that lovely spot.

During the summer of 1658, the two lovers saw each other more intimately at Fontainebleau than at Vincennes or the Louvre. One would have said that some person was interested in facilitating their meetings. Rides through the forest, lunches on the grass, serenades and nocturnal promenades on the grand canal succeeded each other. One day, at Franchart, the King urged his young companion to climb a rocky knoll. "Enough" says the good Mademoiselle "to break one's arms and legs and even to smash one's skull. . ." But the young people did not seem in the

least tired. The King called for fiddlers and they danced on the green until nightfall.

✣

They ended by being caught in their own net and becoming — at certain moments at least — madly in love. It seems that such was not the case at first. Louis sought in Marie at that time simply a connection in which he could take pride, a passion of high character, worthy of his rank and of the peerless cavalier which he plumed himself to be. And Marie had no other purpose, at the outset, than to revenge herself for the scorn of her family, and of Olympe in particular, by taking away her sister's lover. For Louis XIV had at first paid court to Olympe Mancini, and Marie could find in her sovereign's love both retaliation and a victory for her pride. To crush the proud Olympe was her main concern. After that, she would see. . .

And yet, to anyone knowing the ruthless ambition of her character, it seems well nigh impossible that she should not have cherished, from the first day, the hope of being a queen.

Be this true or not, she showed no sign of it. During the first two years of their platonic love, these two, in fact, do not appear to have wished to be anything but lovers according to the literary and romantic formula of the day.

Louis exerted himself to dazzle his mistress by all the knightly prowesses of which a young hero is capable. During the siege of Montmédy, he voluntarily exposed himself to danger, that he might cause Marie's eyes to shine at the account of his exploits. The Grande Mademoiselle, who had followed the Court to Sedan, describes one of these scenes as follows: "The King arrived from Sedan on Tuesday, at two o'clock in the afternoon. The Queen Mother had bid him come to dinner. He arrived galloping, so wet and muddy that the Queen, seeing him in that state, told me through the window: 'I would prefer that you should not see him before he changes clothes! . . .' He came in, and I thought that he looked well despite his careless attire. . . The King started to speak about Montmédy. . . He said that at a certain spot, in the woods, the coach in which sat Montaigu and Bartet had been fired at and riddled and the coachman wounded. . . Hearing the rumpus, he had mounted his horse and ridden to the woods, where ten or twelve fusiliers had been captured. . ."

All these fine stories were told only for the edification of Marie, who was there, in the Queen's room, and listened, fluttering, thrilled and blushing with delight. Thus Louis endeavoured to copy the imaginary heroes

whose adventures he had read about with his little friend. Tacitly, they both seemed to admit that this exalted love would in no way interfere with the marriage of one or the other, even if they could not marry each other. Such conjugal ties need not hinder their love; they might even fan its flame. I repeat that this love was platonic at first, and remained so to the end. Contemporaries hint that, if this has been the case, it was because Marie, coldly ambitious, knew how to keep her lover at arm's length. . . Others recall that the young girl was well guarded by a grim duenna, Mme de Venel, wife of an Aix magistrate, whom the Cardinal had especially entrusted with the chaperoning of his nieces. It must be admitted also that chance played a providential part in this adventure, for how else can one explain that two young people, passionately fond of each other as they were, could spend hours, and at times nights *tête-à-tête,* without irreparable consequences for the honour of one or the other? The King's temperament and sensual violence must not be forgotten. . . Still, such discretion was perhaps not impossible to minds nurtured on the most exalted literary platonism. The simplest explanation would be that the King respected Marie, because he loved her with an almost religious love.

However, this love, as in all the romantic

tales of the day, seemed quite reconcilable with marriage — marriage with someone else. When the Court moved to Lyons, at the end of 1658, supposedly for the betrothal ceremonies of Louis XIV and the Princess Marguerite of Savoy, Marie Mancini accompanied the King. Considering that the two lovers never saw more of one another than during this trip and were never more continuously together and mutually engrossed, it is obvious that they both admitted the possible continuation of their love, notwithstanding the King's imminent marriage.

It came to pass that the King of France did not wed the Princess Marguerite, that Marie Mancini had a hand in the breaking off, and finally that Louis XIV returned from Lyons, quite decided to marry his little friend.

And yet, he did not marry her — and this was, together with the death of his mother, the greatest sorrow of his life. He went on his knees before Anne of Austria and Cardinal Mazarin who opposed this union. He shed torrents of tears. He became actually ill. After one of these pathetic scenes, the Queen Mother said to her confidante, Mme de Motteville: — " Could you see the King, you would pity him! "

He was prepared to do anything in order to marry the woman he loved — impose his will,

silence the Cardinal and his own mother, exile them if need be, stir up against himself the opinion of his kingdom, and endanger his crown. What cared he, so long as he married Marie? . . . His was a true passion, with all the blind fury — and romanticism — that go with it.

But life is not so simple as that. However madly carried away, he did not give way to his passion, chiefly because Mazarin was there to prevent him from doing so. That, at least, was the reason which he gave himself, and which is given by all his contemporaries. But it is extremely probable that, in the innermost recesses of his conscience — and although he would not admit it to himself — he had given up all thought of taking Marie in marriage.

Had Mazarin not been there, someone else would surely have prevented the king from becoming so foolishly embroiled. Realizing already his own qualities of leadership, he must have felt that he had not been born to become the husband of a silly little madcap like the Mancini girl, and that he had something better to do in this world.

Nevertheless, it was some time before he loosened his ties. He must have loved her deeply. For he had realized at last that Marie loved him only that she might become a queen. Her love, at times, was perhaps sincere, but it

was never disinterested. The best proof of this young person's selfish designs is that she accepted readily enough the breaking off of all relations with him when his marriage was definitely arranged. Once, during the summer of 1659, they met at Saint-Jean-d'Angély and solemnly promised to love one another even after their respective marriages, since they were to marry against their will, but Marie did not keep her promise, while the King kept his. After his marriage, he often tried to resume their relations, but always to no purpose.

The last blow came to him when he learned that the faithless one wished to marry Prince Charles of Lorraine. She did not hide it, and some friendly souls even succeeded in persuading the King that Marie was really in love with the Prince.

Nothing could have grieved him more deeply. Not only had this adored mistress given her heart to another man, but this man was also one of the worst enemies of France! . . . Both the sovereign and the lover were sorely tried by this breach of faith. Louis had to acknowledge that the ambitious niece of Mazarin cared but little for his love, when a queen's crown was no longer at stake.

Furthermore, worse things could be foreseen. Either to make reprisals or through

restlessness and megalomania, would not this intriguer, once married to Prince Charles, whisper hints of revenge to her husband and once more have the House of Lorraine in arms against the House of France?

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Endowed with a thoughtful, observing and ever distrustful mind, the young king drew from this romantic adventure a few conclusions not unprofitable to his future conduct. First of all, he was not long in finding out that, in all this matter, he had been handled very cleverly and, at times, rather trickily by the Cardinal. The Italian had tricked this candid beginner in the realm of love and gallantry even more than had his niece. This powerful minister expected to rule his master as he liked, and had encouraged, at first, the royal wooer's inclination for the Mancini minx. He hoped that, being indebted to him for all her successes, she would become a docile and tractable tool in his hands, and that, once the King should have assumed the reins of government, he himself would continue to rule the kingdom through his niece. At first, he may have felt no repugnance at marrying her to his godson (for Mazarin had held Louis XIV over the baptismal font). But he was soon convinced that Marie detested him, did him all the

ill turns in her power with the King, and would have no respite until she had had him discharged. So the crafty Cardinal changed tactics.

When Louis finally admitted his passion for Marie, Mazarin did everything in his power to break up the possible marriage by invoking exigencies of State and a hundred other arguments, all very noble and lofty. He brutally separated the two lovers. He even went further; he taxed his ingenuity to set them at variance, and succeeded. He told Marie, who believed him, that Louis was false to her and loved her sister Olympe, the Comtesse de Soissons. Later, fearing a possible reconciliation between the King and his niece, he saw to it that Louis was convinced of Marie's mad love for Prince Charles. The King's sentiments could not withstand this betrayal, true or not.

Having come to his senses, his romantic exaltation was followed by a realization of these deceitful manœuvres. His first conclusion was that a king is continuously imposed upon by those who surround him and that nothing is harder to find, for him who wears a crown, than a friend, woman or man, worthy of absolute trust. On the other hand, Marie's conduct in that affair proved that no woman could be wholly sincere toward him, since she loved in him only the King, the Crown and all its

accessory benefits. Hence his distrust for women and their love.

Finally, his mistress' indifference showed him that a woman is incapable of sacrificing herself to the interest of the State. He had accepted this sacrifice when resigning himself to marry the Infante, but Marie had neither understood nor admitted this political necessity. She had abandoned him when she had realized that she could not marry him.

Very well, then! Instead of struggling against fate and the exigences of his high station, he would submit and be resigned. Since it was the King, and not the man, that women pursued and even loved, he would be King, and only King, even in his loves. Henceforth, he seems to have said to his mistresses: " Love me, if you will, but do not forget that I am the King, that is to say a being accountable to the State for each of his minutes, who must sacrifice to the State his most intimate feelings, who is responsible to public opinion, constantly in the public eye, and always on a stage. I am forced to put myself to much inconvenience, and I'll knuckle under — at any price. You will do likewise and undergo the same constraint. You are more than my mistress, you are a lady-in-waiting, superintendent of the Queen, a privileged duchess. In virtue of this, you will ride in my coaches with my consort,

follow me to the country or to wars, be present at my banquets, balls and festivities, whether it please you or not, even if you are ill. You may call this demand a frightful selfishness; I call it fulfilling the duties of my office. You will do as I do; I perform these tasks whether I like them or not, in sickness or in health, even if my life be in peril. . . Do not forget that you are the mistress of a King and not of a common individual, and that the King may neither brave public opinion nor scandalize his subjects by his conduct. Hence, both our loves and our ruptures must be secret. You will neither have the right to make a scene when I stop loving you, — for nothing is impossible, — nor noisily to display your repentance, should you by any chance regret having loved me. Appearances will be your main concern, as they are mine, and, if I may be grandiloquent, you will be a martyr to appearances, as I am. Constraint is the essence of grandeur! . . ."

Secret as the intimate thoughts of Louis XIV may always have been, his constant attitude in the realm of love proves that such were his sentiments. He even went further. If we dare scrutinize his innermost conscience, we find that he had a very high idea of his royal self. Beside considering his office as a perpetual sacrifice to the State, he believed that

he, the King, deserved that others should sacrifice themselves completely to him.

He had been told often enough that he was a God on earth, a living Christ. Like the Christian whose supreme happiness is to sacrifice himself for his God, so others should find felicity in sacrificing themselves for his sake. Since he worked arduously and continuously for the public good, he deserved some compensation, some reward. And this reward would be that others should inconvenience, nay, immolate themselves for him, if necessary, and accept him with all his caprices, his unkindness, his overwhelming and somewhat tyrannical personality. . .

Obviously, such sentiments are difficult to admit and understand in these democratic days. But if we remember what a grip monarchical idolatry had upon France in the 17th century, we shall realize that Louis XIV could entertain such thoughts quite naturally. I may add that, even to-day, it is not uncommon to meet with a similar selfishness in men who know or believe themselves to be heroes or geniuses.

Yet, positive and egoistic in love as Louis XIV wished to be, he was, by temperament and character, too amorous not to try loving once again, in the most romantic sense of the word. And that is why, in spite of all his distrust, in

spite of his recent unhappy experience, he allowed himself to love Louise de La Vallière.

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The background of this new idyl was Fontainebleau and the newly-born Versailles — the Fontainebleau of hunts, feasts on the green and moonlight sails on the grand canal, the Versailles of labyrinths, trick grottoes and shadowy groves.

It was the summer of 1661. June and July in that year were excessively hot. The Court had followed the King to Fontainebleau and merry-making was continuous. Life was spent out of doors, in the gardens, the park and, especially, the forest. Madame Henriette of England, recently married to Monsieur, brother of the King, was the soul of this holidaying, the moving spirit of all entertainments. " All amusements ", writes Mme de La Fayette, " were at her command, all the entertaining was done for her, and it seems that the King only enjoyed himself in so far as she was pleased. It was midsummer. Madame went bathing every day. She started out in her coach, on account of the heat, and returned on horseback, followed by all the ladies, elegantly dressed, a thousand plumes waving on their head, and accompanied by the King and the young bloods of the Court. After supper, we

took barouches and, to the sound of fiddles, we promenaded along the canal during most of the night. . ."

At that time, in fact, Louis XIV was casting love-sick eyes at his sister-in-law. Rumour had it already that he would sally forth to her conquest. Married, the previous year, and against his will, to the Infante Marie-Thérèse, a plain and charmless person, who was besides in state of advanced pregnancy, he was seeking extra-conjugal consolations. Strange that he should have singled out the Duchesse d'Orléans, this young Henriette whom he had at first disdained! There is a cruel pleasantry of his on record concerning his future sister-in-law, who was extremely thin before her marriage. He is quoted as having remarked to Monsieur: — " Brother, why so anxious to embrace the bones of the Holy Innocents? . . ."

But a few months had been enough to transform the awkward young girl. It is hardly probable that this change was due to Monsieur, one of the least amiable of men. Henriette, the bride, like her brother-in-law, was seeking consolation out of wedlock. She loved the Comte de Guiche, one of the favourites of her sorry husband. " He was " writes Mme de La Fayette " the handsomest young man at Court; of amiable temperament, daring, brave, with lofty sentiments. . ." This secret passion

for the comely lad had so improved the frail Henriette that the King thought her more and more bewitching. The fire in her lovely dark eyes was to singe the wings of this royal moth.

Although sincerely fond of Guiche, Madame did not avoid would-be wooers. There was a pleasurable sense of vengeance in bringing under her subjection the insolent monarch who had seemed at first to scorn her. She even might have turned away from Guiche to give herself to her ardent brother-in-law, so powerful was the King's prestige over the feminine hearts of that day. But Louis XIV, perspicacious and always suspicious, must have surmised this coquettish by-play and suspected Madame's insincerity.

Now the King wished above all to be loved by her whom he loved, and considered her absolute surrender as essential. To him, sincerity in love was more important than beauty. And perhaps that is why he thought first of Madame Henriette, who assuredly was not beautiful. However, the mental reservations which he suspected in her and, above all, the fear of scandal, drove him back to other loves. He had an innate horror of scandal, as of every other sort of disorder. What an outcry there would be in the Court, and perhaps in the entire kingdom, if it were known that he loved

his sister-in-law! His mother had already remonstrated with him over his attentions to the young woman. . . . So, for all these reasons, the dissatisfied husband looked favourably on a lady-in-waiting to the Duchesse d'Orléans herself, the daughter of a humble gentleman of Touraine, Louise de La Baume Le Blanc — the future Duchesse de La Vallière.

Louise too was no beauty. Pamphleteers of the period assert that like Louis XIV himself she was slightly pitted with the marks of smallpox, but it is unlikely that this slight and not uncommon physical drawback helped to bring them together. In La Vallière's case there is small reason to doubt the existence of this blemish, for otherwise we should not have so much insistence, among the most laudatory of her contemporaries, on the extreme whiteness of her complexion. Besides this, her eyelids were a little too heavy, her mouth was too large, her limp was too pronounced to be concealed. To undergo the fascination of this charming young woman, we must keep away from her later portraits. In these she is represented as a duchess, in full Court costume, with all her feathers on her head and all her jewels on her person — and she looks like a starving sheep. She is a woman who has suffered much and wept much; her eyes are sad, her features drawn and hard, the drooping

corners of her mouth tell of a deep bitterness of spirit.

Not in these pictures, but in a work by Mignard, is to be found her most fascinating portrait — not perhaps the most photographic, but certainly the most touching, the most lifelike, the truest to the character of her soul. She is shown chastely gathering up a falling scarf by which her bosom is half concealed. Here we realise the charm of her lovely blue eyes, of her face, of her whole person — a candid and virginal charm which wholly distracted attention from her too visible defects. A subtle connoisseur of all things feminine, the Abbé de Choisy, seems to have struck the right note and understood her peculiar attractiveness when he wrote: " She was not one of these perfect beauties whom one admires without loving. She was very lovely, and this line of La Fontaine:

And Grace more fair than Beauty's self,

seems to have been indited for her."

This not too beautiful maiden, this shy, obscure little girl, seemed to have been created expressly for the King's love. Sprung, like his ministers, from the inglorious ranks of the bourgeoisie, she brought with her nothing that could assign her to a brilliant destiny. She was to owe everything to the master's choice, and

thus there was a chance that this humble creature, be it only through gratitude, would love him who had deigned to notice her. These considerations surely influenced the feelings of Louis XIV for La Vallière, but he was not quite conscious of them and they were not immediately formulated. The King at first, with the concurrence of Madame, had thought of pretending an interest for La Vallière, who was one of her maids of honour, in order to justify his attentions toward his sister-in-law. In modern parlance, one might say that this innocent young person was their smoke-screen. . .

The way in which this stratagem was frustrated was quite unforeseen and contrary to the King's intentions. He was caught in his own net. He became enamoured of his intended victim and cast off his accomplice in this somewhat ruthless calculation.

Evidently, neither kindness, faithfulness nor loyalty can be expected from the actors in this little drama of passion. We are here in the Land o' Love, where all are faithless and lawless. Even from the most upright lovers, we can expect naught but weakness, cowardice, perfidy and cruelty. Here, once more, the god of Love amused himself by deriding his puppets and making them dance at his will, regardless of their intentions or sentiments. The

King, without a qualm, betrayed Madame, whom he seemed to love. Madame, in turn, betrayed both the Comte de Guiche, her lover, and her maid of honour, by letting her believe that the King loved her. And it is not improbable that La Vallière herself, living with other sophisticated young women in a world of intrigue and gossip, obligingly played the rôle that was expected of her. In any case, she knew that the King, in the opinion of the Court, was Madame's paramour. His love for his sister-in-law was open. Louise could not be unaware of it. Yet this did not keep her from taking Louis from his mistress, who was also her benefactress.

Her sole excuse, as well as the King's, was that they loved each other. Such is, in fact, love's only apology: it is its own law. Passion would no longer be passion if it were capable of conquering itself. The King, however, with his positive and calculating mind, believed himself to be henceforward the ruler of his heart. He had, at first, wanted nothing more than a gallant adventure with La Vallière and his sister-in-law, a pastime and a frolic between two royal tasks, for even then he considered himself as a slave to his office. To serve the State came first and foremost; to love, for a prince, should be but a diversion. Such was his belief, and he caused it to be ex-

pressed by all who could influence public opinion. In January 1663, when his intimacy with La Vallière had reached its highest pitch, the chorus in a ballet — the words of which had been written by Benserade and in which he himself appeared as a shepherd — greeted him with this almost official declaration:

This is the hamlet's fair renown. . .

Though of the age when we all feel
So strong a zest for pleasures gay,
His pleasures lead him not away!
To tasks in hand he's ever leal.

Back to his work he goes straightway.
On bracken soft no slumberer he,
No shepherdess will make him be
Forgetting wolves may near them stray.

Even in that torrid summer of 1661, among all the conspiring allurements of Nature, women and pleasure, he was far from " forgetting the wolf ", in the words of the song. His mind was then most anxiously engrossed. He was planning to overturn Fouquet, and the omnipotence of his *surintendant* filled him with such fears that he thought it wise to prepare a complicated plan before daring to arrest him.

On the other hand, however quiescent Europe may have seemed to be at that time, he

could foresee imminent conflicts. To raise troops was of momentous importance. Assisted by Colbert and Le Tellier, he laboured at adding to his treasury, stabilizing his finances, increasing and equipping his army, laying by food and ammunition. . . And it was then, when concerned with such weighty questions, that he was caught by a poor little *provinciale*, a maid of honour — all but a servant — to Madame, his sister-in-law.

He was caught, in truth, because he felt forthwith that La Vallière loved him. In his eyes, this love, unreservedly given, was a priceless treasure. At last, he would revel in what he had longed and sought for so ardently, a sincere love, a total surrender. He would be loved for himself, and not because he was the King! He would be loved, like those young lady-killers at his Court, like Guiche, like Vardes, like Lauzun — like Don Juan!

One thing is certain in this affair, otherwise mysterious in many ways. La Vallière loved Louis with all her heart and he requited her love. How could the poor creature resist the advances of this dashing boy of twenty-two, the most accomplished cavalier at his Court, a clever dancer, a brilliant and, at times, caustic *causeur*, who, we are told by Saint-Simon, " could tell a story better than anyone ".

We have a word-picture of him, at that

time, which seems fairly true and deserves to be quoted, at any rate, because it is felicitously expressed, though its suspicious source prevents us from vouching for its faithfulness. It is, in *La France Galante,* an imaginary conversation, about La Vallière between Madame Henriette and the Duchesse de Chevreuse:

"Madame asked the duchess whether she knew anyone happier than that girl.

'Yes, Madame,' bravely answered the duchess, 'I believe that I am even happier than she, when I see the legate, for he is surely a thousand times more charming than the King. . .'

'Indeed,' replied Madame, 'the legate is more handsome and amiable than the King. But, as for wit, I must tell you that no one could have more than the King gives proofs of when he is with one whom he loves, and that is also true of reverence. I repeat, Madame, that you cannot know how agreeable the King's intimacy can be to a person for whom he entertains a passion. Just imagine! One would think that she is the only woman in the world. He looks at her with as much love in the last minute of a visit of seven or eight hours as he did in the first. He sacrifices all to her and makes her think that he depends on her alone. He is infinitely attentive. Lastly, if

what Mlle d'Artigny (La Vallière's confidante) said recently to one of my friends is true, and I believe it is, I know of no one who loves as well as the King.'

'What, Madame?' answered the Duchess, 'not even the Comte de Guiche?' 'He is very nice,' said Madame, '*but not as passionate as the King. . .*'"

This portrait is decidedly too flattering to be strictly true. But it is very probable that the women of that time — and especially La Vallière — saw the King so. With the complicity of his epoch, he has created or embodied a new type of lover from which the tragedies, comedies and novels of his day alike drew their models. This lover is no longer the unreal, grandiloquent, madly romantic hero of the time of the *précieuses,* but a soldier, back from the wars and preparing to return, still wearing the jerkin and boots of the fighter, but able, despite this roughness, to be passionate, tender and even respectful, witty and charming. In this blending of the intellect and the heart, in this sublimating and refining of passion by dint of intelligence and ingenuity, Louis XIV inspired his mistresses — and the poets of his time — with a resplendent love-theme, further amplified by the admiration which he prompted. A gesture, a word from him, had, in the soul of a La Vallière, an

infinite aftermath; in the same way as a mere indication, a wish, a hint, fallen from his lips and heard by one of his painters or architects, would suffice to produce a masterpiece. He prides himself, in his *Memoirs*, on having " busied the highest geniuses " of his century, but he also kept busy the soul and imagination of all the women who loved him. La Vallière herself, indifferent to all worldly grandeur, to whom love and passion stood for all things, saw more in him than a lover: she saw a King and, like all of France, she loved in him the glory of her native land.

One must remember all this to understand the mad passion which urged this unfortunate woman to face scandal and defy propriety. Guarded and timid by nature, she became, when blindly enamoured, capable of the most audacious boldness when she thought her love was threatened. She indulged in such mad pranks as no other of the King's mistresses ever dared to play: during the campaign of Flanders, for instance, before the Court and the troops, and under the very eyes of the Queen, she had her coach driven in pursuit of the King, eager to regain a lover whom another was about to steal away from her. Again, she twice took refuge in a convent in Chaillot, in a passion of despair or a moment of exasperated jealousy. And she obstinately re-

mained at Court, even after her rupture with the King. . .

Always in hope of getting him back, she endured for nearly ten years the presence of her rival and remained bent on that insane dream until, unable to stand this martyrdom, she finally decided to enter a monastery. How could anyone misunderstand her sentiments, since she explained them herself so clearly? Mme de Sévigné wrote, on the 12th of February 1671: " Through the Maréchal de Bellefonds, the Duchesse de La Vallière has sent word to the King, besides the letter we have not seen, that *she would have left Court sooner,* after having lost the honour of his favour, *had she been able to persuade herself not to see him any more;* but that this weakness ruled her so completely that she was hardly capable of offering it to God as a sacrifice."

So she stayed at Court. She bore with the daily presence of Mme de Montespan, the woman who had stolen the King's heart from her. She did it only because she still loved him. And when she returned again from Chaillot and, for three years, took back her place by the side of her rival, it was because she had set her heart upon her love and did not despair of winning back the faithless one. For a time, by this suppositious departure and the display of her despair, sincere as it as-

suredly was, she believed that she had moved the heart of her former lover, for Mme de Sévigné adds that: " The King wept bitterly and sent M. Colbert to Chaillot, begging her to return to Versailles, where he would talk to her anew. M. Colbert brought her there. The King and she talked for an hour and he shed many tears. And Mme de Montespan went to meet her, with open arms and tears in her eyes. All this business is beyond me. Some say that she will stay at Versailles and at Court; others that she will return to Chaillot. We shall see."

A few days later, the marquise ended her story of this episode with these mischievous words: " As for Mme de La Vallière, we are much grieved that we cannot bring her back to you at Chaillot. *For she is at Court, and more firmly intrenched than she had been for some time. You must resign yourself to leaving her there. . .*"

She remained there, in fact, for a long time, unable to cure herself of that fearful passion and suffering cruelly for the pleasure of seeing every day the man whom she loved and who loved her no longer. Surely, this unhappy woman deserves our pity. But who can say whether the King ever ceased to love her? We know, in any case, that he showed her to the last not only the most considerate regard but also the warmest friendship. We have seen

that, on her return from Chaillot, the King received her with tears in his eyes and conversed with her at length. His words must have been tender and persuasive, since she elected to stay. Three years later, when finally she entered a Carmelites' cloister, never to return, the King parted from her only with great distress. One hour after, his eyes were still red and tear-stained. . .

How can such marked and persistent proofs of affection be reconciled with the unkindness which Louis is said to have manifested toward La Vallière?

Doubtless, he entertained a very high idea of himself, as king, and a wholly mystical conception of his rôle. Especially was he convinced that all should gladly sacrifice themselves for him. But he was too much of a gentleman, too humane and too sensitive to have deliberately hurt the feelings of a woman whom he had loved passionately and for whom he ceased to care only long after their apparent rupture.

All the anecdotes related with a view to proving the King's hard-heartedness are without historical value. They are taken from very doubtful sources — pamphlets, licentious novels, racy and gossipy correspondence, memoirs

written long after the events which they described. On the other hand, the initial mistake of those who judge Louis XIV so severely is to consider him as an ordinary individual and to forget the duties of " the king business ". He was quite unable fully to belong to her whom he loved. He could not free himself from a strict etiquette which ruled even his pleasures and obliged him to take them at fixed hours. Lastly, in order to avoid scandal, he was forced to hide his conduct as much as possible — particularly when involved in an adulterous adventure. We must not forget, after all, that he was married. He remembered it so well himself that, except at the front or when ill, he never spent a day without paying his respects to the Queen, and he never deserted the conjugal bed.

Harrowing tales have been told of La Vallière's solitary lyings-in. But lovers who enter open-eyed into an adulterous relation and are, besides, public personages, performing public duties, must resign themselves to accepting the consequences of their fault as well as the obligations of their office. Even if La Vallière and her friend had been commoners, the most elementary decency would have urged them not to display the consequence of their irregular amours.

In fact, they resorted to praiseworthy pre-

cautions to avoid scandal, and the King, especially, did everything in his power to reconcile his affection with the necessities of his charge and the observance of royal decorum. During her first confinement, in November 1663, La Vallière was installed by Louis in the Hôtel Brion, a small private house adjoining the Louvre. Colbert and his wife were intrusted with the preliminary details. An *accoucheur,* a wet-nurse, a godfather and a godmother were retained. The King himself was at the young woman's bedside when the first pains began. But he could not stay until the end for, on that day, etiquette called him to a stag-hunt. Considering the couple's scandalous situation, we must admit that he could not have acted more sensibly. Who would criticize the King's conduct in this case? Was he to install his pregnant mistress in the Louvre's most beautiful chamber and summon the Court to her delivery, as for a Queen of France? The 17th century was an epoch of firm common-sense and strict Christian discipline, and such an absurd fancy would have been severely censured.

La Vallière herself was so conscious of her fault that, like the King, she did all that was humanly possible to conceal it. Three weeks after the birth of her first child, still pale and not fully recovered from her confinement, she

insisted on attending midnight mass, so as not to arouse public curiosity by a protracted absence.

A later incident excites still more the historians' emotions. La Vallière is said to have given birth to Mlle de Blois — again clandestinely — in a room at the Château de Vincennes. We are not told in what room, or in what part of the castle. It seems that this particular room was " bespoken " and served as passage into the main apartments. Now, in the " new castle " at Vincennes, in which Mazarin died, every room on the first floor has its door leading into a corridor. If La Vallière occupied one of these rooms, she could have remained alone at will. However, such arguments are useless, for here all is hypothetical. . . Let us admit that she was in that formal and pompous room, open to all. Suddenly, the door opens. Someone approaches. La Vallière recognizes Madame Henriette, once her mistress and her rival, who has not forgotten, and whose feminine eye unerringly falls upon the ailing girl: — " Ah, Madame, I have a colic! I am dying! " exclaims Louise. And, Henriette having gone on her way: — " Hurry! " says she to Boucher, the *accoucheur,* " I wish to be delivered before she returns! "

On the former occasions she had been al-

lowed to keep her child for a few hours at least. But on this, her baby daughter was scarcely born when she was taken away, her cries smothered in her swaddling-clothes. It has been said — and these details are admissible, although they come from rather doubtful sources — that, the child having been born without mishap, La Vallière felt responsible for her own life only, and heroically endangered it to show her respect for the Queen, who was then at Vincennes. Wishing to conceal from her sovereign the affront of which she had been guilty in the Queen's own palace, Louise had her room filled with plants and flowers, oblivious of the danger of their perfume, deadly to a woman in her state. She dressed splendidly, received visitors, had the gambling tables set up and, in the evening gave a meat-supper. These second tortures, worse than the first, lasted twelve hours. . . "[1]

A pathetic narrative indeed. . . But we are forced to admit that its source is questionable, being the *Memoirs* of the Grande Mademoiselle. The story begins as follows, in the critical edition of Chéruel: "Mlle de Blois was born at Vincennes, after the death of the Queen-Mother, and *I have often heard,* since then, that La Vallière, being about to give birth to a child . . ."

[1] J. Lair, *Louise de La Vallière et la Jeunesse de Louis XIV*, p. 179.

So these moving details are nothing more than hearsay, collected and recorded long after the event, by Mlle de Montpensier. . . Granting that they are true and that a premature delivery had taken La Vallière by surprise, how could the King be responsible for this unforeseen and clandestine event? La Vallière must have had her own excellent reasons for following the Court to Vincennes. The jealousy which blinded her at the time, and caused her to follow the King and Mme de Montespan step by step, had made her forget her condition and the scandalous risk that she ran. Wisdom should have counseled her to stay at home, inasmuch as no official function obliged her to be seen at Vincennes. She was not a duchess yet, and no longer maid of honour to Madame. Lastly, she had two apartments, one in Paris and the other in Versailles, where she could be confined in comfort. We must conclude that her stay at Vincennes was not against her will. Since she consented to deceive the Queen in her own palace, she had to accept all the consequences of her actions: concealment and mean and discreditable ruses, that the scandal be not aggravated. To put it frankly, a nasty business. If the royal bird fouled his own nest, we do not see why his accomplice should come out as white as snow from this adventure.

In truth, posterity has shown an excessive indulgence toward La Vallière, thanks to the romantic axiom: Love is entitled to every right. She herself was so convinced of it that, in her fits of despair and jealousy, she stopped at nothing to affirm her love's pretended rights. She knew that the King had a horror of scandal, of any prolonged disorder, and that is why she multiplied her pranks. Fully aware that he was a man of orderly habits, she hoped perhaps that she could bring him back to her through his fear of scandal.

Thus may be explained her two flights from Court, which were followed by endless gossiping. Full well did the King know that all this was but a feint and that she would hasten back at his first intimation of affection. That is why he did not believe in her religious calling and raised so many obstacles against her entering a convent. He always feared her noisy return. When, driven to despair, her decision became final, she gave to her penitence such a blatant stage-setting that Louis XIV must have been sorely displeased. By means of this public penance and disavowal of her love, she wished to inflict a formal indictment upon that twice adulterous couple: her rival and the King. This was clearly seen by all — by Mme de Sévigné as well as by her cousin Bussy-Rabutin. At first, the shrewd letter-writer

could not believe that La Vallière's retirement could be sincere. And Bussy wrote: "*Jealousy* has made this miracle. It seemed to me that her conduct was not dictated by humility but by vengeance and that, by deploring her past life, she meant to censure the present conduct of her rival. . ."

In any case, her adieux were emphatic, as if they were intended to annoy a certain person. . . She even felt called upon to throw herself at the Queen's feet and beg her forgiveness before the entire Court. It has been customary to admire this noble gesture of La Vallière, but I believe, in common with a number of her contemporaries, that it was not without a flavour of revenge. It was, at all events, a shameful scene, and should have been dispensed with.

It is not hard to understand why Louis XIV eventually wearied of such a conspicuous and embarrassing mistress. Anything might happen with a woman so distraught with love. . . Eternal contradiction of the human heart! He had wooed La Vallière only that he might be loved for himself and find refuge in a trusting breast, and the disinterested love which he had sought so ardently was the chief cause of his indifference. He was a public official as well as a lover; she was an amorous woman who had no desire to be anything else

but an amorous woman; and as time went on the amorous woman became fearfully inconvenient to the public official. She was forever parading him and putting him in compromising situations. She wanted the King all for herself and contended for him with the State. She was indifferent to the King's " glory " — to those achievements as nation-builder and military leader which he loved above all else. She neither praised him nor inspired him to lofty deeds. She neither urged nor advised him in his sumptuous and magnificent achievements. And such were the King's main concerns and ambition.

This is one of the reasons why he left La Vallière and let himself be enticed by the Montespan. He believed that, in the beautiful Athénaïs, he had found at last a truly royal soul — a soul similar to his own. . .

II

THE VOLUPTUARY

FRANÇOISE ATHENAÏS DE ROCHECHOUART, Marquise de Montespan, — "the adorable Mortemart", as she was called by the gazetteers of the period, — was a much more dazzling and imposing beauty than La Vallière, who was a modest soul and would much have preferred to conceal her happiness and her good fortune in the most private of retreats.

Primi Visconti, the Italian adventurer, who spent part of his life at the French court and who knew her well, has described Mme de Montespan in these terms: "She had golden hair, big sky-blue eyes, a well-shaped aquiline nose, a small red mouth, and beautiful teeth. Her face, in a word, was perfect. In figure she was of medium height and harmonious proportions." The eulogy is confirmed by a thousand contemporary witnesses, from Mme de Sévigné to the licentious editors of *La France Galante*. But the Princesse Palatine, the formidable sister-in-law of Louis XIV,

supplies us with a corrective: " The Montespan had a whiter skin than La Vallière. She had fine blond hair, fine hands, fine arms, which La Vallière had not. But the latter was extremely cleanly as to her person, and the Montespan was the opposite." We must remember, however, that the Palatine made it a practice to detest all her brother-in-law's mistresses, and that she wrote these words in 1719, long after Mme de Montespan's death.

Among the portraits which have come down to us, the one which corresponds most closely with what we know of both her character and her physical appearance is a painting attributed to Mignard and now hanging in the Château de Blois. Unfortunately the handsome woman which it depicts has brown hair, while every known evidence assures us that the Montespan was a blonde. Are we to suppose that she began life as a brunette and had her hair dyed in deference to the well-known preference of Louis XIV for golden locks? For it is to be noted that, with the exception of Marie Mancini and Mme de Maintenon, his first and last loves, practically all the King's favourites were blondes. Mme de Soubise, the object of one of his least platonic passions, is even alleged to have been red-headed. On the other hand it is quite possible that the portrait at Blois is improperly de-

scribed, and is not a portrait of the Montespan at all. And it is also highly probable that she, like the rest of the world, may have changed a good deal in looks in the course of a lifetime. This is a point which we are too apt to overlook when we are thinking of these world-shaking beauties of the past; they did not remain twenty years of age for ever. At forty, and after many pregnancies — she had seven children by Louis XIV alone — Mme de Montespan appears to have become decidedly plump. Primi Visconti provides the following realistic details: " She was then so fat that one day, when she was alighting from her carriage, I was able to see that one of her legs was almost as big around as I am." And he adds: " She used to have herself rubbed with pomades and perfumes, while stretched out naked on a bed, for two or three hours a day."

In truth, there was a good deal of the courtesan about this great lady. And her ascendancy over the King was first secured by means of physical attraction.

✣

Sensuality, therefore, to give it no lower name, seems to have been the original basis of this new passion. At the moment when Louis XIV fell in love with the fair Athénaïs he was on the point of attaining his thirtieth year,

and was in the full bloom of his vigorous manhood. Ill repressed by a too rigid upbringing, his lustful instincts were now running riot, with no other check than that fear of scandal, that untiring regard for his position and its obligations, which curbed his fiery temperament and would alone have sufficed to keep him from being engulfed in debauchery. To put it plainly, he was now passing through a crisis of animality. For the time being he was the typical successful fighting man, fresh from a fairly lively " scrap ", who springs from his horse to calm his warlike passion in the arms of some handsome woman without bothering to remove his boots or the mud and dust of his clothes.

More than at any other time in his reign, Louis XIV was at this moment wrapped up in the glories of war. All his time was taken up with his musketeers and their uniforms. His mind was full of parades, general manœuvres, military spectacles, to which he invited the ladies of the Court. He must have women along, in order that he may make an exhibition of his strength before them. He crams them into coaches and drags them up and down the firing-line. Venus is convoyed to the camp of Mars. Kisses within sound of the cannon, trysts within range of rifle-fire — such are the violent sensations which he seems to be seek-

ing. Love is already stale on his palate; risk and glory must give it a new relish. He has no objection to a certain lack of delicacy, not to say a certain grossness, in his affairs. The sexual instinct, too persistently played upon, reverts to the simplicity of nature. We may note then that his sensual passion for Mme de Montespan began during the war in Flanders, in the summer of 1667. A not altogether fortuitous accident housed them both beneath the same roof. A further chance allotted to the Montespan and a woman friend a room next to that of the King; and a still further chance caused this friend to absent herself for a night. Court gossip has it that the first time Louis XIV visited Mme de Montespan's bed he burst into the room in the disguise of a Swiss guard, and that Mme d'Heudicourt, her bedfellow, vanished just in time to leave the coast clear for the lovers. It also happened not infrequently on these occasions that the Court party found itself reduced to sleeping in the open air, or the next thing to it — an unharnessed coach in the middle of a field, or a country inn, a peasant's cottage, even a barn or a stable.

Such a mingling of luxury and simplicity, not to say rusticity, is inconceivable to-day. The Grande Mademoiselle has described the primitive encampments of the Court, follow-

ing upon the heels of the armies. Here is exactly how things happened during the campaign of 1667, which saw the beginning of the King's love for Mme de Montespan: " At night-fall, we arrived at M. de Turenne's headquarters, in the village of Contiche, where the army was. *We went into a barn,* the walls of which were curtained (probably with tapestries brought in the royal vans). The Queen began to play cards. I went to write a letter in M. de Turenne's room, to have the satisfaction of dating it from camp. The chimney in M. de Turenne's kitchen caught fire. This disturbed the supper, which was neither elegant nor magnificent. But we had been warned by the King, who knew how M. de Turenne received his guests. Cards were played all night. I slept a little, *on a chair, with my head propped against one of the barn's corner-posts.* The Queen slept in the King's coach, in which he sleeps when with the troops. . ."

Scenes of the most comical character were constantly occurring during these peregrinations, which their royal majesties put up with as best they could. Here is another episode, which again took place in Flanders, three years later, in May 1670:

" On approaching Landrecies," writes the Grande Mademoiselle, " at one o'clock at night, we found the river so swollen that we could

ford it only with difficulty. . . There was a tumble-down house in a field. The Queen left her carriage. It was then two o'clock. *We had a candle.* The Queen wished to go into the other room, for there were two. Mme de Béthune, who carried the light before her, was helping her. I followed, bearing her train. Suddenly, I sank into the ground to my knee.

" The Queen said: ' Cousin, you are pulling me! '

" I answered: ' Madame, I have fallen into a hole! Wait till I extricate myself! '

" I was all wet, and my clothes dried on me.

" The Queen was very worried. The King said: ' We must wait for daylight, and rest in our coaches! '

" The horses were unharnessed. I had my carriage arranged with cushions from the others. I put a bonnet on my head, my dressing-gown over my dress, and unlaced my stays a little. But I could not sleep, for it was frightfully noisy. . . ".

But that was not all. The next day, they not only had to find a place in which to sleep but also something to eat — a grievous problem! Mademoiselle gives us a sorry opinion of the commissariat:

" Someone came to me and said: ' The King and Queen are going to eat! '

" I called for my sedan-chair, for it was

impossible to go through the mud without boots. . ."

The fare was thin enough: "The Queen" (we still quote Mademoiselle) "took a little broth. *There was some left in the pot, and I drank it. . .*"

Again, the all-important business of going to bed!

"I found the Queen in low spirits, saying that she would be ill if she did not sleep, and adding: 'These voyages are far from pleasant!'

"The King said: 'They have just brought mattresses. Romecourt has a brand-new bed in which you may sleep.'

"She replied: 'That would be horrible! . . . What! All sleep together?'

"The King said: 'Why not? . . . On mattresses, and fully clad . . . would it be wrong? I don't believe so. Ask my cousin! We'll leave it to her and do as she says.'

"I could see no evil in ten or twelve women sleeping in a room with the King and Monsieur. The Queen assented. . ."

But there was more to follow: "Mme de Thianges, hearing some cows and donkeys that were in a stable behind us, suddenly said: 'This makes me feel quite devout; it puts me in mind of the birth of Our Lord!'

"The comparison was just, and the spectacle of the King in a stable like Our Lord might in

truth have inspired devout feelings. But she had spoken in jest. So the Queen laughed, and this pleased the King, who disliked hearing her grumble. . . So we went to sleep. . ."

Let us not forget that two lovers were among these sleeping partners of both sexes. Mme de Montespan was there, in the stable, close to the King, along with her sister, Mme de Thianges.

Our readers will forgive us for having laid stress on these somewhat intimate scenes, for they give us a deep insight into the most intimate customs of old France and help us to understand the sensuous spell which seems to have been cast upon Louis XIV at that time. He was no longer the sentimental swain who sleeps upon the sweet ferns of the dell and graves his lass's name upon the beech-tree's bark. He had become an impudent trooper, intoxicated with the smell of gunpowder, glorying in his martial trappings, and tracking his feminine prey into the very straw-beds of the stables, or the hay-mows of the barns.

It would not be fitting to lay undue stress on these fits of brutal sensuality. Not for long could our lustful lover forget that he was King of France. He wished to be a hero, a demi-god — Mars, or laurel-crowned Apollo. The

climax of his idyl with Venus must come in a bed bespread with the battle-flags of armies — or in mid-heaven, behind the fiery chariot-horses of the Sun.

We should be wrong to see no more than a crisis of lewdness in Louis' passion for Mme de Montespan. He did not love her solely for her physical charm, he enjoyed also her conversation and her wit — a malicious and slanderous wit, but lively and finical in the fashion of the time. Furthermore, let us not forget that Louis XIV, if not sentimental, was passionate and exquisite, in love with love and priding himself on his fine feelings. It is certain that he loved Mme de Montespan, although not in the same way as he had loved La Vallière and Marie Mancini, and was pained when his love was not reciprocated. "The Montespan," writes the Princesse Palatine, "was a creature of whims, irked by constraint, fond of all kinds of pleasure, *and bored when alone with the King. Self-interest and ambition prompted her love and she did not give a fig for his person.* In order to distract his attention, she conceived the plan of inviting Mme de Maintenon, so that he should not notice her own gambling and trifling. The King would have liked to spend more time with her. *He reproached her often with not loving him enough.* This resulted in quarrels and misunderstandings."

Good as our reasons may be for mistrusting the Palatine's opinion of one of her brother-in-law's favourites, there is surely much truth in these spiteful comments, which make the King's true love for Mme de Montespan stand out all the more clearly.

Evidently, this was neither the candid love of his eighteenth year, the romantic and, so to speak, virginal love that he had felt for Marie Mancini, nor the tender and at times exalted and jealous affection once awakened in his breast by Louise de La Vallière. This new inclination was much more complex — consisting in part of a feverish sensuality, but mostly of ostentation. As conspicuous and showy as a courtesan, as sumptuous and haughty as a *grande dame,* as keen and whimsical as a poet, this mistress was good advertising. The King could display her with as much pride as the gardens and palaces which he showed to the distinguished foreigners who came to Versailles. This peculiar feature of his love is subtly analysed in one of Mme de Sévigné's letters to her daughter. Following a reconciliation which had transfigured the fair Athénaïs, already somewhat stout from age and numerous confinements, the sparkling Marquise portrays her in these words: " Her beauty is surprising. Her waist is not half as large as it was and still her eyes, lips and complexion are as fine

as ever. She was dressed in *point de France.* Her hair was arranged in a thousand curls, the two on her temples falling quite low. Black ribbons on her head, the Maréchale de L' Hôpital's pearls enriched with magnificent diamond buckles and pendants, three or four jewelled hairpins, no veil. . . In a word, *a triumphant beauty to display before admiring ambassadors.*"

If Louis XIV was conscious of what he was and of what he stood for, Françoise-Athénaïs de Mortemart herself was not ignorant of her worth. Not only did she glory in her beauty, the sparkling facets of her wit, the inbred exquisiteness which attracted her to art and literature, but she also prided herself on her ancestry. She claimed to be a descendant of the Dukes of Aquitaine and, consequently, of more ancient lineage than the Bourbons. She was the veritable Queen of France: beside her, the grandson of Henri IV was but a *parvenu!* She succeeded in convincing the King of the truth of all these fairy-tales, and he was so deeply impressed that he felt that he never could do enough for such a mistress.

His nature underwent a veritable transformation. The craving for grandeur, power and glory which lay dormant in him was kindled by his desire to astound the Montespan and to

compel her love. The royal ambitions assumed a new intensity.

Despite a natural propensity for thrift, if not miserliness, he became prodigal, and even lavish, to please the Montespan. The daughter of the Dukes of Aquitaine must be impressed. . . Naturally brave and of unimpeachable courage, he had neither the hot-headed and somewhat wild gallantry of a François I nor the martial enthusiasm of a Henri IV. But he suddenly became reckless and foolhardy, uselessly exposed himself to bullets and bombs during sieges, travelled through trenches, boldly headed scouting-parties in the open country. Overnight, this cool and calculating man, master of himself and slow to take decisions, leaving nothing to chance and at times excessively cautious, assumed a daring and adventurous manner, the eagle eye of one used to instantaneous decisions, even at times an aggressive violence. He tried to give the impression that none could resist his power, his riches, his armies. To the Montespan and his contemporaries he must appear as nothing less than a demi-god. . .

To say that this " proud Vasthi " was the King's most powerful inspiration would be historically inaccurate. He had already taxed his ingenuity to outdo himself for La Vallière and Marie Mancini. He had endeavoured to

seem as chivalrous and fascinating as a hero of romance. And Marie Mancini had already tried her hand at the rôle of inspirer. But the King's transformation, or rather this well-defined assertion of the royal character, coincides with the period of his subservience to Mme de Montespan.

At all events, the great wars and great expenses of his reign date from that period, and what might be called the politics of magnificence. The essentially French spirit of thrift vanished, to be replaced by a lavishness until then unknown in the country.

Even without Mme de Montespan, of course, Versailles would still have been built, but its festivities might not have been as tremendous. Some of these entertainments were held especially in her honour. Certain transformations and improvements were made to please her whims and fancies. The King altered the ancient Château de Saint-Germain chiefly to please and amaze his mistress. "Hanging gardens" were actually laid out under her windows. Even when with his army, he worked feverishly at the plans of all these embellishments. War was raging, in 1673, when he wrote to Colbert: "All your letters have told me nothing with respect to the work done at Saint-Germain on the terraces of Mme de Montespan's apartment. . .

Those that have been started must be finished, and the others arranged as aviaries. To that end, have only the walls and ceiling painted, and a wire netting put up on the court side, with a fountain at the bottom, that the birds may drink. The other side must also be painted and ornamented with a fountain, as Mme de Montespan wishes to lay out flower-beds there." Thus was the old deserted castle beautified to delight the favourite. Flowers bloomed everywhere — jessamine and jonquils, tuberoses and potted orange-trees, rare and colourful birds, sparkling pools and fountains beneath the arched windows. And in the cool apartments, among the new frescoes, under the blazing chandeliers and girandoles, fiddlers played every night. . .

At Versailles, the Porcelain Trianon and the Château de Clagny were built especially for her. Only pictures are left to remind us to-day of these charming structures. The first Trianon was a frail construction, destined to disappear, like a stage-setting no longer in demand, and the architecture of Clagny seems to have been somewhat cold and stiff. But we are told that the gardens were magnificent. "We have been to Clagny," writes Mme de Sévigné to her daughter. "How can I describe it? 'Tis the palace of Armida. The building process is going on most rapidly. The gardens

are completed. You know Le Nôtre and his style . . . he has left a dark wooded space which is very picturesque. There is a grove of orange-trees, all potted in large boxes. One wanders there, through shady paths where one may read, and the wooden boxes are hidden by waist-high fences, covered with tuberoses, roses, jessamine and carnations in full bloom. Surely, one cannot imagine a more beautiful and enchanting novelty. . ."

The King squandered money to lodge his mistress in what he thought would be a fitting frame for her beauty, to deck her out like a wax doll and satisfy her caprices, her passsion for gambling, her love of pomp and display. She must needs give out all the perfumes of Paphos, wear on her person diamonds worth millions, overwhelm all the ladies of the Court by the richness and inventive ingeniousness of her toilettes. On the evenings when Louis held his court, the Montespan, coruscating with gems, bespangled and stiff with brocade, was dazzlingly resplendent.

No one knew more about precious stones than she did, as the Grande Mademoiselle points out, not without malice. The favourite could draw at will from a casket of jewels which the King had ordered Colbert to secure for that purpose and which he kept plentifully filled. " Madame de Montespan," writes

Louis to his minister, " absolutely refuses that I should give her jewels. But, in order that she should not lack any, I wish you to have a small casket made, very neat, to hold such gems as I shall describe later, so that I may have enough to lend her what she may like, at any time. It seems extraordinary, but she will not hear me speak of gifts. — There will be, in this casket, a pearl necklace, and it should be very beautiful; two pairs of ear-rings, one of diamonds, which should be very fine, and one of various stones; diamond clasps in a case; jeweled clasps in a case, the jewels and diamonds of which may be removed at any time. I also want stones of all colours, so that she may wear the one or the other. There must be also a pair of pearl ear-rings and four dozen buttons with interchangeable centre stones. . . I tell you all this now, so that you shall have time to have everything done at leisure. The beautiful things must be beautiful, and the work must be carefully executed. Occasionally, I may use these jewels to some other purpose, if they suit my needs. This casket must be at hand at all times, so that its contents may be at my immediate disposal. . ."

This confidential note throws much light on certain tastes of Louis XIV. It reveals how this great military leader and statesman found time to take nearly as deep an interest as his

mistress in a string of pearls or a diamond clasp. He was an ardent collector of rare stones and masterpieces of the goldsmith's art. He closely interested himself in both the beauty of the material and the high finish of the workmanship: " *and this must be beautiful! . . . and that must be neat! . . .*" He was born with the tastes of an art-lover, and a zeal for perfection even in the smallest things.

His natural instinct for the delicate and the luxurious was however undoubtedly heightened by amorous passion and the wish to please a greedy, domineering and pleasure-loving woman. The generous disinterestedness, naïvely mentioned by the King, was merely assumed. The Grande Mademoiselle quotes the following remark, inadvertently made by the Montespan, which shows her in her true character: " At Court, *one should grab everything*, for who knows who comes next? "

The poor Mademoiselle, indeed, could speak feelingly of the favourite's insatiable greediness, having been plundered by Mme de Montespan in the most cold-blooded manner. In order to obtain the King's pardon for her beloved Lauzun, who was emprisoned at Pignerol, Mademoiselle, on the instigation of the Marquise, had consented to bequeath to the young Duc du Maine her principality of

Dombes and the earldom of Eu. Full well did the unfortunate woman know that these manœuvres had no other purpose than to swindle her out of her property, but she gave in, partly through passion and partly through weariness. Mme de Montespan had no rest until she had cheated the wealthiest heiress in the kingdom out of her fortune, or at least the greater part of it. Taking advantage of an old maid's passion for a fop, she cleverly induced her to do what she wanted. Mademoiselle, in other words, was properly blackmailed.

Mme de Montespan was an inveterate spendthrift. She needed money all the time, not only to run her luxurious household, but also to gamble, for cards were her vice and it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that she would have stopped at no crime to satisfy her passion. Playing as she did for outrageous stakes, this mad gamester could lose a million in one night. The King, not always cheerfully, was forced to settle her losses. The Montespan proved to be a huge expense. Each one of her gowns cost a fortune. There is a well-known description, by Mme de Sévigné, of one of her Court dresses: "She wore a dress of gold over gold cloth, embroidered in gold, and, over that, some frills of gold, brocaded with gold mixed with a certain other gold,

which makes the most divine stuff imaginable. *I am sure that it is some fairy's secret handiwork . . .*"

On that occasion, the "divine" dress had been a surprise-gift to the fair Athénaïs from a courtier, the Marquis de Langlée. But, as a rule, the King paid the piper. And thus this pupil of the miserly Mazarin, this sovereign who was thrifty by training though sumptuous by nature, became a prodigal prince.

Love caused another transformation. Louis, once shy and constantly afraid of scandal, ended eventually, if not by defying public opinion, at least by displaying his adulterous relation audaciously before the Court and endeavouring to give it the appearance of an admitted and legitimate arrangement. On the evenings of reception, Mme de Montespan was truly the Queen. "La Belle Madame" — such was the name by which she was called by everyone, including, strangely enough, her own children — "The Beautiful Lady" seemed born to fill the rôle she now assumed. Saint-Simon assures us that she never could abandon "this queenly demeanour, which she had assumed while in favour and maintained in her retirement. At that time, all became so accustomed to it that it did not occur to anyone to grumble. *The back of her armchair joined the foot of her bed. It was useless to try and*

find other seats in the room, there were none, not even for her illegitimate children, Mme la Duchesse d'Orléans, or anybody else. . . One may judge, by this detail, how haughtily she received her callers. . . All France begged for admittance. It had become, I know not by what conceit, a duty. . . She addressed each one like a queen holding her court and honouring those to whom she deigns to speak. Whoever came in was treated with great formality, and as for calls, she never paid any, not even on Monsieur, or Madame, or the Grande Mademoiselle, or at the Hôtel de Condé. . ."

If Mme de Montespan acted in this wise when grown old and abandoned by her lover, one may well imagine her pretensions in the days of her favour, when she took liberties which not only annoyed the King but also scandalized the decent element at Court. Not only did the Beautiful Lady parade her fortune and high-mightiness, she also displayed the ostentatious insolence of a courtesan who can abandon caution with a conquered lover. Relating a triumphant return into grace of the fair Athénaïs, Mme de Sévigné describes her as follows: " At the gambling table, the other day, *Quanto* (a code-name used by the Marquise in her letters) rested her head familiarly upon her friend's (the King's) shoulder. To

us, this affection meant: 'I am more in favour than ever. . .'"

Assuredly, such manners — or lack of manners — deeply shocked Louis XIV, whose punctiliousness never relaxed. But he put up with them, because the Beautiful Lady had succeeded in mastering him and he could no longer do without her. The Montespan was the King's vice. . .

Thus, through love or animality, this man, who feared scandal so deeply, hurled himself into the very midst of scandal. It has been said that he scandalized his century. That is a moot print, and calls for an explanation.

In spite of religious discipline, becoming stricter every day, French customs and habits were far from edifying during the reign of Louis XIV and even after his conversion. However chaste and guarded in their wording, the memoirs of that period convince the reader that it was a time of coarse, brutal and ill-repressed instincts and, at any rate, of violent passions. The veil of modesty required by morality and propriety is torn repeatedly, and the contemporaries of the *Grand Roi* stand revealed in the postures of satyrs and bacchantes. Despite the Jansenists, *précieux* and

précieuses, the old *gauloiserie,* dear to readers of Rabelais, is not dead. Outlawed from the higher literature, it has taken refuge in countless licentious publications and still frolics in the streets.

Amongst a thousand other anecdotes, here is one told by a kind and learned priest, Father Brûlard, in a letter written to his friend Bussy-Rabutin. When the States-General of Burgundy were convened in the Dijon Palace, a certain meeting was, we are told, particularly stormy, in that year, much like the parliaments of to-day. During one of the most riotous sittings, the good cleric says that "a jester took it into his head to sew a monk to a strumpet, from head to foot, which increased and prolonged the din. . ." The picture may be imagined.

Bussy himself was quite a gossip. We quote from one of his letters, written on June 30th, 1671: "The Maréchal de Grancey has for a mistress a Lady of the Chamber called du Mény, who betrays him with every man at Court. The King himself laughs at him. . . The other day, this nymph having gone to mass at the Grands Jacobins, which is now the smart church, Mme de La Baume happened to be there also and to go in as the other was coming out. Mme du Mény's lackey having jostled Mme de La Baume's servant, was given

a great box on the ear by this prudish beldame. . . Furies! The worst names were exchanged on the church-steps: 'Slut! Trollop! Drab! . . . *et cætera.*' The entire congregation made a circle around them and much enjoyed the tiff."

"Last Saturday," also writes Bussy, "Mme de Lionne returning home, jolly and gay, from the King's apartments, found a *lettre-de-cachet* ordering her to Angers. Her husband had been incensed against her through certain letters of the Marquis de Cœuvres, his son-in-law, informing him of the highly moral teachings which she gave to her daughter. It is rumoured that mother and lass, with the Comte de Saulx between them, were found lying in the same bed. This has caused a tremendous stir. . ."

This licentiousness, periodically followed by scandals, was not the worst characteristic of the times. It was, indeed, surpassed by the coarseness of the manners, entertainments and, at times, language which prevailed. The most unkind, and even cruel, nicknames were current coin at Court. The Comtesse de Soissons was called *La Bécasse* (the idiot, the goose), the Duc du Maine *Le Gambillart* (the hopper, the hobbler), because he limped. A son of the Marquis de Villars, who was slightly hunchbacked, was named *Le Gobin* — "Humpy"

Villars. Mlle de Valançay, who was thin, became *Fichette* (little peg), and the Duc d'Orléans' second daughter was *La Poupotte de Monsieur* (Monsieur's chub-cheeked darling).

They were a cruel people, and they had to have their butts, their targets and their whipping boys. Among these grotesque wretches, the Princesse d'Harcourt shared with a certain Madame Panache the privilege of amusing the Court at her own expense. Saint-Simon relates many instances of this, amongst which is the following: "Monseigneur and Mme la Duchesse de Bourgogne played constant tricks upon her. One day, they ordered firecrackers to be scattered all along the path which she had to follow from the Château de Marly to the Perspective, where she lived. Two chairmen were instructed to offer their services when she should be ready to go. Half-way along the path, everyone having left the salon and standing in the doorway to see the fun, the crackers began to pop. She screamed in terror. The servants dropped her chair onto the ground and ran away. She shrieked like a demon and struggled so with rage that she threatened to upset her chair. The noble company drew nearer that they might enjoy the show and hear her abusing all who came forward, and especially Monseigneur and Mme la Duchesse de

Bourgogne. . . Another time, this prince fastened a firecracker under the seat of her chair, while she was playing piquet in the drawing-room. *He was going to set fire to it when some kind soul told him that he might cripple her,* and prevented him from doing so. Again some twenty Swiss guards would be ordered to march into her bedchamber, beating their drums and awakening her from her first sleep with their uproar. . . Another time, again at Marly, they stayed up very late, until she was in bed and asleep. . . It had snowed heavily and it was freezing very hard. Mme la Duchesse de Bourgogne and her attendants took some snow on the terrace and, to have a larger supply, awakened the servants of the Maréchal de Lorge, who provided them with as many snowballs as they needed. Then, with latchkeys and candles, they slipped quietly into the room of the Princesse d'Harcourt and, suddenly pulling the curtains aside, pelted her unmercifully. . . The nymph was swimming in her bed, from which water poured and deluged the room. She might have perished. . ."

One shudders at the thought that such boorish butcher-boys' jests and fishwives' pranks were the pastime of the heir to the throne, of Bossuet's pupil, — and of that charming Duchesse de Bourgogne, whom the prudish

Mme de Maintenon preferred to all the other young women at Saint-Cyr.

It is certain that the King, from the inception of his reign, tried to stem to the best of his ability this brutal licentiousness of Court and town. He never shared in the vulgar debauchery indulged in by many amongst those who approached him. Strictly speaking from the point of view of morals, he deserves no criticism save in connection with his *penchant* for women and his protracted relations with La Vallière and Mme de Montespan. Moreover, and in fairness to him, we must add that he at least tried to save appearances in the first stages of these affairs. They remained secret until he deemed dissimulation useless, the public being aware of them.

The birth of his illegitimate children was also kept secret. For many years, the adulterine children of Mme de Montespan lived in seclusion in a mysterious house at Vaugirard, under the care of Mme de Maintenon. And when they were subsequently legitimized by the King, following the example of his grandsire Henri IV and his father-in-law Philip IV of Spain, this was done mostly for dynastic reasons which we have explained elsewhere.[1]

It cannot be said that he ever deliberately

[1] Cf. my book: *Louis XIV*, Fayard, Paris, 1923.

"advertised" his loves. On the contrary, secrecy was his first rule of conduct. When he did break it, it was through being carried away by passion, or through the vanity of his mistresses, who wished ostentatiously to show off in the light of his favour. There was nothing out of the ordinary in his walking with La Vallière in the Versailles or Tuileries gardens, followed by a retinue of ladies and courtiers: there always had been a privileged female whom the King would single out as a companion and whose conversation attracted him more than any other — the Comtesse de Soissons or Mme de Choisy, Mme de Monaco or Henriette his sister-in-law. But it being *known* that he was La Vallière's lover, the consideration that he showed for her, and that he would have had for any other person whom he wished to honour, took on an added significance. Sycophancy did the rest. Eager to please the royal favourite, the courtiers accentuated the scandal by their excessive zeal.

We must admit that the King did not show the same discretion with regard to Mme de Montespan. He allowed her to parade his favour. Once her children were publicly legitimized, she became the titular mistress and avowed favourite. He suffered her flatterers and parasites to make up a sort of court. He

had a veritable palace built for her. When travelling through the provinces, she was received with the same honours as the Queen herself. The King, of course, did not instruct his governors and intendants to act in such a way, and it is even most probable that he disapproved of these too signal honours. But all the dignitaries in the kingdom believed that the master would be pleased with such excessive demonstrations. In the ordinary course of events, it seems probable that more discretion was shown and that, as a rule, all events were characterized by perfect propriety. The King was too highly imbued with a sense of order and measure not to have coloured even his guilty relations with the Montespan with a truly royal dignity and stateliness. We have read Saint-Simon's comments on the respect with which courtiers approached Mme de Montespan. The Queen herself visited her rival, who had become her *surintendante* after having been her lady in waiting. She went to Clagny and the Porcelain Trianon, which had been built expressly for the Beautiful Lady — not as a caller on the King's favourite, but as a sovereign pleasantly willing to be entertained by her *surintendante* or lady in waiting. She deigned to ignore — publicly at least — the conjugal unfaithfulness.

It is for that same reason that she allowed her

husband's mistresses to ride with her in her coach. They did so in their capacity of lady in waiting, *surintendante* or *duchesse à tabouret* (footstool duchesses). Whatever other relation existed between them and the King, she chose, and it was her duty, to be unaware of it. Had they not held office in her household, the King himself could not have forced their presence upon her. There is no truth in Saint-Simon's much quoted legend of *the three queens,* which portrays Louis XIV appearing before his subjects and his soldiers, accompanied by his consort and his two mistresses. He may, doubtless, have shared their coach, but with other persons besides. For instance, the Marquis de Saint-Maurice, at that time ambassador from Savoy, wrote to his master in May 1670: " The King left Saint-Germain last Monday on a trip to Flanders, with one of the most pompous and stately retinues ever seen. There were eight in his coach: he, the Queen, Monsieur, Mme la Duchesse d'Orléans, Mlle de Montpensier, *the Duchesse de La Vallière,* the Comtesse de Béthune and *the Marquise de Montespan.*" The presence of the two favourites among the members of the royal family was justified by their office in the Queen's and Madame's households.

There is no recorded case of the King's ever travelling publicly and *alone* with his two mis-

tresses, or *alone* with his two mistresses and the Queen. We know too well, by now, his regard for propriety to believe that he ever would have set all decorum at defiance in such a heedless manner.

True, the highest ethics would doubtless frown at such promiscuousness. It would have been wiser to refrain from indiscretions which became the prey of wagging tongues and ruffled ticklish consciences. But it is also evident that the King did his best, in a general way, to attenuate the scandal of his conduct. It is not through his fault that his enemies magnified it inordinately by making as much of an uproar as they could over his slightest peccadilloes. The Dutch and the Huguenot refugees in Holland, the Germans and the English roused Europe against him. They added to his very real failings a host of atrocious and unfounded calumnies, and spread throughout the world hundreds of pamphlets and ribald novels intended to besmirch the royal reputation. Nor must we forget his enemies at home. Filthy songs and satires, prying into his most intimate private life, were circulated in Paris and at Versailles and found, unfortunately, too many complacent hearers.

In those he found his punishment for the criminal love that he bore to Mme de Montespan. The dangerous woman — who at first

perhaps had a beneficent influence over him — was to become the shame of his life.

The King was attached to her by many ties, the strongest of which was perhaps that of habit. I repeat it once more, for it was a trait of his character: Louis XIV, even in love, was a man of habits. Such regulated instincts, in types of his sensuous temperament, are easily reconciled with an inclination toward amorous fancies. Those who knew him never deemed his ephemeral caprices to be of any importance. Bussy-Rabutin, for instance, always wagered that La Vallière would return to Versailles, even after her much-advertised flights to Chaillot, even after her entering a convent for the first time. And he refused, for a long time, to believe in the final disgrace of Mme de Montespan.

However deeply he may have been attached to this voluptuous and prolific mistress, ceaseless squabbles nevertheless were bound to bring about a violent and complete separation. A thousand disagreements resulted in constant strife, and the lady's difficult and imperious disposition was the main cause of their discord. Quarrelsome by nature, ill-balanced and neurotic, she plagued the King with perpetual scenes, and at such times showed great super-

ciliousness. She knew perfectly well how to cope with his tyrannical temperament, and had designed her policy to that end. It was a case of mastering or being mastered by him. Hence, these fits of anger, these ceaseless recriminations, these furious scenes which the Beautiful Lady lavished upon her lover. She actually terrorized him, for she knew that La Vallière's sweetness and humility had been the cause of her downfall. She thought that she could retain his favour by the opposite course. She would reign through pride and violence. . .

Moreover, she was both unkind and sarcastic. "The courtiers" — writes Saint-Simon — "avoided passing under her windows, especially when the King was with her. They said that they were 'put to the sword', and this expression became proverbial at Court. It is true that she spared nobody, often with no other purpose than to amuse the King, and since she was extremely caustic and witty, nothing was more dangerous than to be ridiculed by her. . ."

It is true that no one escaped her raillery, which often had no other object than to amuse the King, and as she had any amount of wit and cleverness it was far more dangerous to be ridiculed by her than by anybody else at the Court. As a matter of fact even the King

was not exempt from her jesting, which frequently made cruel reference to his physical defects. One day, in the course of a dispute in which the King accused her of pride, malice and an intense desire for power, she retorted that while she might have the faults with which he charged her, at least she did not smell as bad as he did.

The King might have replied that he was cleaner than she. The Palatine, it will be remembered, described Mme de Montespan as " a dirty person ". However there is no conclusive evidence on this point, which unfortunately cannot be said for the unpleasant smell of which she accused her lover. *The Journal of the King's Health* contains references to certain deplorable infirmities from which His Majesty suffered for a long time. His teeth had been poor from childhood, and some of them were in very bad condition. One of his surgeons broke off a piece of the jaw when performing an extraction, and this caused decay of the bone, which was accompanied by a fetid running of the nose. The King had halitosis, which was undoubtedly the reason why Mme de Montespan drenched herself in perfume. The position of royal mistress evidently had its little drawbacks.

The powerful perfumery of the Fair Lady eventually annoyed and even alarmed her

lover; it was supposed in those days that certain perfumes were actually poisonous. " The day the King left Saint-Germain ", writes Bussy, " the 18th of May 1680, as he was getting into his coach with the Queen, he exchanged strong words with Mme de Montespan about the scents with which she drenches herself and which make His Majesty ill. At first the King spoke civilly enough, but when she replied with a good deal of bitterness His Majesty became angry ". A few days later Mme de Sévigné wrote: " The other day there was a violent dispute between the King and Mme de Montespan. M. Colbert worked hard to get it cleared up, and had difficulty in inducing His Majesty to have the midnight supper in the usual way; it was only done on condition that everybody should come in ".

The date of these incidents is towards the end of the favourite's reign, at the time when a rupture was imminent. But from the very beginning she wearied the King by her greediness and by her perpetual demand for patronage and money. She never had the slightest political influence. Louis XIV did not intend his mistresses for any other service than that of his own pleasure. He had sworn that they should never exercise any power over him, and we may say that he kept his word to the letter.

This however did not prevent him, in his capacity as source of all favours, from granting to the lady whom he had selected some fat religious post or some lucrative office for herself or for her relatives. Mme de Montespan worked, and worked to death, all her privileges of solicitation and nomination. She was a strong family woman, and she took active charge of the interests of her brother, the Admiral Duc de Vivonne, whose debauched life and decidedly libertine ideas were delaying his advancement. The task of obtaining for him his Marshal's baton gave her a good deal of trouble. There is a malicious story told by the Abbé de Choisy concerning this prolonged and arduous intrigue: " The King had drawn up with Louvois the list of those who were to be honoured with the baton of a Marshal of France. He then went to the rooms of Mme de Montespan, who *while rummaging in his pockets* took out this list and seeing no mention of her brother M. de Vivonne went into *one of her fits of rage*. The King, who could not and indeed dared not withstand her to her face stammered out that M. de Louvois must have forgotten to include him. ' Send for him at once! ' she said in an imperious tone, and went on to administer a proper scolding. Louvois was sent for, the King told him very gently that he must have forgotten Vivonne, and the

Minister accepted the burden and pleaded guilty of the mistake he had not committed. Vivonne was put on the list, the lady was quieted, and Louvois escaped with a rebuke from her for his negligence in a matter so closely concerning her interests ".

It is difficult to believe that the King really acted so much like a small boy in this interview with the marquise. If we examine closely the details of this story, and, with even the slightest knowledge of the character of Louis XIV, remember his authoritative manner, his severe and sometimes terrifying aspect, his jealous passion for mastery, his regard for the *convenances* and for the royal dignity, we are bound to suspect the witty Abbé of introducing a good deal of imagination into his anecdote. It is difficult to see Mme de Montespan rummaging in the King's pockets, and especially to see the King stammering at her like a school-boy caught breaking the rules. But the incontestible part of the story is the anger of the favourite and the violence which she must have employed to extort from the King a nomination which was certainly repugnant to his feelings. And that reference to " one of her fits of rage " tells us much of the character of the Fair Lady. If there were times when it was not so good to be the King's mistress, there were also times when it was not

wholly agreeable to be the lover of Mme de Montespan.

For this lover, ordinarily so generous, so indulgent to the caprices of his friend, had at times the painful feeling that she was scarcely in love with him — that even in their most intimate moments the mind of the marquise was elsewhere. In imagination she was in the gambling-room, seated at a table of lansquenet or " hoca "; or with all her feathers and diamonds on her head, she was lording it before a court of young women and young men; she was dancing a *passe-pied* or a *coranto;* she was seeking distraction in the hum of conversation, of laughter and of violin music; she was dazzling her eyes with the lights of the gems and crystal candelabra of the ballroom. The King, who with advancing years aspired to more tranquility and greater quietude, could not help being much shocked by these frivolous preoccupations. He felt that the marquise was attached to him only by interest, by the desire for pleasure. He may even have had doubts as to her fidelity. Anonymous letters were not wanting which insinuated this poison into his mind. In any case there was a current story that before her connection with the King she had been the mistress of the famous Lauzun, " that insolent little man ", who at the beginning of the reign had been the favour-

ite of all the women at Court. This story has never been cleared up, but it appears more than probable that there was something between Lauzun and Mme de Montespan and that the little man blackmailed her with the threat of some discreditable disclosure. Saint-Simon gives us a spicy anecdote which proves that there existed an astonishing degree of familiarity, if nothing more, between the handsome fellow and the Fair Lady.

Lauzun, who had requested the favourite's interest with the King to obtain for him the post of Grand Master of the Artillery, and who fancied that he had good reason for suspecting her of insincerity, decided to find out where matters stood by the following peculiar method. Thanks to the complicity of a serving-woman, he was enabled to stow himself away underneath Mme de Montespan's bed, where he overheard a highly private conversation which was not in the least flattering to his vanity. He obtained ample assurance that Mme de Montespan, despite all her charming promises, was doing nothing for him and was even working against his interest. In the evening (for these royal rendezvous took place in the afternoon), as the marquise was leaving her rooms to go to a ballet, she found Lauzun awaiting her at her door. With great earnest-

ness he inquired whether he might flatter himself that she had kept him in mind when talking with the King. The marquise swore that she had made innumerable appeals in her friend's favour, but that she deeply regretted to say that they had very little result. Lauzun, keeping her walking with short steps, allowed her to say all that she had to say; then he began to repeat, " in a low and gentle voice, word for word, everything that he had heard under the Fair Lady's bed without a syllable of omission. And then he went on, always in the same low voice, to call her by all the most infamous names that he could think of, such as liar, cheat, hussy, and worse, and to assure her that he would cut her face to pieces, all the while heading her much against her will towards the ballet, where she arrived more dead than alive and in an almost fainting condition."

It is obvious that this anecdote, after being retailed from hand to hand, has received from Saint-Simon the final touch of a work of art. But if Lauzun was really able to treat the marquise in this high-handed fashion (and nothing is less improbable) we must assume that it was the lady's complaisance that gave him authority to do so. The courtiers had no scruples about babbling of it in their common talk. It was even alleged that the Fair Lady

had had various caprices after the beginning of her relations with the King, and that some of her children were not His Majesty's progeny. The Palatine, according to Court gossip, even went so far as to designate the father of one of these children, Mlle de Nantes: Mme de Montespan is supposed to have borne her to the Maréchal de Noailles. This Maréchal, according to Saint-Simon, was an individual " of enormous bulk and solidity, who died like a horse of fatty degeneration." A courtier of the lowest type, of brutal character and debauched life, he was the natural object of a charge of this kind.

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Louis XIV, who had his spies everywhere and was daily kept posted by his " black cabinet " on the secrets carried by the letter bags, was certainly aware of all these rumours, a circumstance which can hardly have improved his relations with his stormy mistress. On the other hand there was in the Court itself a considerable group of pious individuals who worked from morn to night to bring to an end the scandal of his adultery.

This scandal, furthermore, was immeasurably exaggerated by all the King's enemies both at home and abroad. The outraged husband, the Marquis de Montespan himself, contrib-

uted not a little by the uproar that he made about his conjugal misfortunes. It appears that this gentleman would have been perfectly willing to play the complaisant husband, if only those in high places had been willing to put a price on his complaisance. Disappointed in his expectations, he seems to have given himself up to a policy of insults to avenge himself for the Prince's lack of generosity, and to have given his wife a sound beating, thus providing her with the best of excuses for filing a demand for a separation. His own conduct was sufficiently devoid of scruple. Louvois had no trouble in using against him various soldierly extravagances which he had committed while stationed in Roussillon. At Perpignan he seems to have carried off a girl "of very low station", and taken her with him and his troop, "in boy's costume", in spite of the protestations of her mother and the municipal authorities. At Illes, a new outbreak; Montespan carries off another specimen of the same sort of creature and gets the whole district stirred up against him. The ministers of Louis XIV had little trouble in dealing with a soldier of this kind, until at last he decided to settle down and live peacefully on his lands in Guyenne. Even after that, at Toulouse, he seems to have applied the whip to a president's lady who made this jest at his

expense during a game of lansquenet: " Ah! Monsieur, it is not the king of hearts that has given you the most trouble! " M. de Montespan did not allow himself to be jested with on this subject; and he may have had a penchant for thrashing women. In any event he does not seem to have been an interesting character and his contemporaries wasted little pity on him.

Throughout this affair, the point which serious persons kept steadily in mind was what they referred to as " the double adultery " of the marquise and the King. The Huguenots, the Jansenists, all the opposition parties took a severe view of the conduct of Louis XIV. The Catholics could no longer tolerate a scandal which began to bring disrepute upon their religion itself. A pious conspiracy was formed to induce Louis XIV to break off the relation. It included the Père de La Chaise, the King's confessor, Bossuet, at that time the Dauphin's tutor, Mme de Maintenon, the Maréchal de Bellefonds, the whole clan of Chevreuse and Beauvillier.

The Père Bourdaloue, who preached at Court during several successive Lents, had been quite free with the severest admonitions to the Monarch. Three of his sermons in particular — on Impurity, Final Impenitence, and Hell — must have made a profound impression on

Louis XIV. At this time Mme de Maintenon, who had undertaken the redoubtable task of converting the King, began her work of subtle suggestion and discreet evangelization. It may have been at this very time, while she was still merely Mme Scarron, that she ventured to address to the all-powerful autocrat the astonishingly daring utterance which she later on repeated to her pupils of Saint-Cyr: " Sire, you have a great love for your musketeers; they are your chief occupation and amusement at the present time. What would you do if it were reported to your Majesty that one of these musketeers whom you love so much had taken the wife of a man who is still alive and was actually living with her? I am sure that that very night he would go forth from the quarters of the musketeers and would sleep there no longer, no matter how late it might be! "

It was perhaps at that time, when the King's conscience began to be uneasy, that an incident occurred to which historians have not, until now, given much attention and which seems nevertheless to have been decisive. We find it recorded in the *Memoirs* of the Marquis de la Fare:

" The King has always been a religious and timorous prince. One day, at Versailles, he happened to meet a priest who was bringing

the Host to one of his officers. To give an example, he accompanied him to the dying man's house. And this sight moved him so deeply that, upon his return, he could not refrain from imparting to his mistress that his conscience was troubled. She said that she also was repentant, and they decided to part. . ."

Louis XIV, assuredly, had a great reverence for the Holy Sacrament. And this is why a fact such as we have related is extremely important. But this incident was not as simple as La Fare would have us believe. As a matter of fact, it was a plan devised by Bossuet and his friends to wrest from the King a promise that he would never again see Mme de Montespan. Bossuet had written him eloquent and pathetic letters on this subject. Finally, this pastor of the parish of Versailles refused the sacraments to the adulterous monarch. Filled with remorse and contrition, the King capitulated. On the 13th day of April 1675, he received communion in the parish church of Versailles. Bossuet was triumphant: he had obtained La Vallière's admission to the Carmelites and the dismissal of Mme de Montespan. All traces of the protracted royal adultery were at last wiped out.

This triumph was of short duration. After spending a few months with his troops, the King returned to his old habits. Even before

his arrival, Mme de Montespan was already at Versailles. Bossuet went to meet him and renewed his admonitions, but they were useless. Conquered by his passion, the King even kept him from speaking:

" Not a word, Sir, not a word! I have given my orders: they must be obeyed! . . ."

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This state of things might have lasted indefinitely — and it is indeed probable that the Beautiful Lady's reign would have continued as long as she chose — had it not been for the famous *Poison Case,* in which she was abominably compromised.

Many other affairs of the same nature occurred in the 18th century, all more or less scandalous, but this one shocked all Europe. The Italians were jubilant. Henceforth, Italy would not be the only country to deserve the epithet of *venomous.* And the Venetian ambassador loudly exclaimed that the King, in instituting the *Chambre Ardente,* the sole purpose of which was to track down the poisoners, wronged the nation by thus exposing its turpitude. Persons of high degree were involved in these prosecutions and accused of odious or ignoble crimes: the Comtesse de Soissons, the Duchesse de Bouillon, her sister, the Maréchal de Luxembourg, the Marquise de Montespan.

Racine himself — the soft-hearted Racine — was suspected of having had recourse to the dangerous offices of witches and poisoners. Indeed, sorcery and black magic held an important place in this *affaire des poisons.*

Attempts have been made to exonerate Mme de Montespan. It has been denied that she tried to poison La Vallière, the King, Mlle de Fontanges and, perhaps, Mme de Maintenon. But then the poisoning of all those who, closely or not, were connected with the household of Louis XIV has also been denied. This may be explained by a sort of personal hatred which certain historians of the last century bore toward the King. If one were to believe them, this wicked man had wronged everybody, while no one ever wronged him; no one ever tried to poison him nor his mistresses, ministers, children, and grandchildren; he was a tiger, and all his subjects were lambs. Another reason for these systematic negations was that the scientific credo of the 19th century refused to admit, in the domain of history, not only supernatural happenings but also extraordinary ones, such as murder, poisoning and treason. These were mere idle fancies, and calumnies invented by the imagination of the people, or by party spirit! Thus it has been proved " scientifically " — and upon the evidence of autopsies performed Heaven only knows in what

manner! — that Mme Henriette, Louvois and the Duc and Duchesse de Bourgogne all died from some illness. The truth is that we know nothing whatever about it and that the most probable and *natural* explanation of these sudden deaths is — poison. The contemporaries of Louis XIV resorted to it with a deplorable facility and, undoubtedly, Mme de Montespan did not hesitate to have recourse to both poison and witchcraft to rid herself of whoever stood in her way.

The complete record of this dark and sinister affair is not available. Louis XIV himself, terrified by the enormity of the revelations contained in the examination of the Voisin woman and her accomplices, ordered that the most compromising depositions be burned. But what remains of these documents is sufficient to prove the favourite's guilt. The very haste with which the King contrived the disappearance of these terrible accusations against his mistress is but another charge against her.

It all began at the end of the year 1677. On the 21st of September, a note found in the confessional of the Jesuits, in the Rue Saint-Antoine, had revealed a plan for poisoning the King and his son, the Dauphin. The first arrests were made after an investigation which lasted over two months, and these arrests were continued and multiplied during the following

years and until 1681, when the King suspended proceedings. In truth, he felt that he was himself compromised by someone who was very close to him: the Marquise de Montespan.

Her relations with the Voisin woman and her confederates may be traced back to 1666, which is the time when she first thought of winning the King's favour. She would go, in person, to the witch's lair, or send one of her waiting-maids called Desoeillets. It is also probable that she had some communications with a certain Chevalier Louis de Vanens, an alchemist who had taken up demoniacal practices, and who was amongst the first to be arrested by La Reynie at the end of 1677. His servant, when put to the rack, is reported to have said: " The Chevalier de Vanens deserves to be drawn and quartered for the advice that he gave to Mme de Montespan." At any rate, it seems peculiar that, after the favourite's death, a *Course in Chemistry* and an *Universal Pharmacopœia* should have been found amongst the few books that made up her library, at the Château d'Oiron. And we must also believe that frightful suspicions must have hovered over her head, since Mme de Maintenon dared to write to her brother the following sentence: " Madame de Montespan sees me often and has asked me to Clagny — *Jeanne feared for my safety there.*"

The several examinations of the accused, carefully collated by La Reynie, the police lieutenant, show that Mme de Montespan caused several magic conjurations to be performed with a view to getting rid of La Vallière. We find the text of one of these in the record of the case: "I ask for the friendship of the King and of my lord the Dauphin, may it continue in my favour, *may the Queen be barren,* may the King leave her bed and board for me, may I secure from him all that I shall ask for myself and my relatives; may my servants and attendants please him; may I, beloved and respected by the *seigneurs* at Court, be admitted to the King's deliberations and informed of what takes place there; and may the King, his sentiments towards me becoming more tender each day, leave La Vallière and never cast his eyes upon her; and, *the Queen being repudiated, may I wed the King.*"

Other conjurations took place, both to remove La Vallière and to bring about her death. Subsequent events seemed to justify this witchcraft, for Mme de Montespan soon took her rival's place. But this high station was not without its perils. New rivals were always in the offing. Then, to avert this danger, she would hasten to the witch's house or send the Desoeillets woman for advice. Marguerite Mauvoisin, the Voisin woman's daughter,

made the following statement before the judges: " Whenever anything new happened to Mme de Montespan and she feared the waning of the King's favour, she would notify my mother who, in turn, suggested some remedy and also had recourse to the priests, who would say masses (black masses). My mother also gave her powders which she surreptitiously mixed with the King's food."

Thus were powders and conjurations resorted to in 1675, when Louis' return to devoutness determined him to part with his mistress. The same thing happened when Mme de Ludres, followed by Mlle de Fontanges, seemed very near to dethroning Mme de Montespan. Bloody rites accompanied these practices. Children were slaughtered during these black masses, and their blood, mixed in a chalice with ignoble ingredients, was thought to become a potent philter. La Reynie wrote: " The Voisin's daughter said that she had seen that sort of mass performed at her mother's house. . . She helped to lay out the necessary accessories: a mattress spread on chairs, two stools, one on each side, on which were the candlesticks and their lighted tapers. Then Guibourg (one of the priests employed by the Voisin) would come out of a small neighbouring room, wearing his chasuble, and the Voisin would usher in the woman on whose belly the

mass was to be said. Three years ago, Mme de Montespan had that sort of mass celebrated at her mother's house. She arrived at ten o'clock and left at midnight. *The Voisin's daughter adds that a child was slaughtered during the mass that Mme de Montespan caused to be said at her mother's house. . .*"

One may well imagine the stupor and shame of Louis XIV when he read these monstrous revelations. So murder, poison, and witchcraft were the means used in order to retain his love! The Beautiful Lady whom he had adored took part in disgusting and sacrilegious rites and allowed the butchering, in her presence, of innocent creatures that her thirst for power might be appeased! More shameful yet, she had tried to stupefy and debase him by bringing him under the subjection of his instincts and exciting his senses with unclean drugs — for the drugs mentioned by the Voisin's daughter were " love-powders ", veritable aphrodisiacs prepared with cantharides and all sorts of repugnant ingredients. One of the King's butlers, bribed by Mme de Montespan, was said to have mixed these powders with his master's food and drink. This, doubtless, would explain the species of satyriasis which tormented Louis XIV so frequently between 1675 and 1680 — and also the headaches, vertigo, fainting fits and general uneasiness fre-

quently mentioned in the *Diary of the King's Health.* In my opinion, historians have not brought out clearly enough the fact that Louis XIV, for as long as ten or fifteen years, was literally poisoned by aphrodisiacs. This would explain his periodical unfaithfulness and passing fancies at that time, which in such circumstances would have been no more than physical phenomena. It is much more to be wondered at that this thirty-five-year-old man, thus artificially excited and more exposed than anyone else to constant temptations, showed such discretion and reserve in his pleasures.

The Beautiful Lady had done all this in cold blood. She had added sacrilege to the ignominy of those practices, for the powders, during mass, were placed under the chalice and blessed by the priest at offertory. The favourite had wished to make of her lover a lecherous beast. And worse still, she had tried, in a moment of rage and jealousy, to poison the King and his new mistress! . . .

This last comer was the unfortunate Fontanges, who died, at the age of twenty-two, after a painful delivery, and in such suspicious circumstances that the King, fearing terrible revelations, forbade an autopsy. Within a few months, he had made her a *duchesse à tabouret* and showered a thousand gifts and favours

upon her. It seemed, indeed, that the last blow had come to Mme de Montespan. But unwilling to accept defeat, and mad with despair, she planned a double poisoning. "My mother told me", stated the Voisin's daughter, "that, at that time, Mme de Montespan wished to carry things to an extreme and tried to make her do things which were most distasteful to her. My mother allowed me to understand that there was a plot against the King and I felt sure of it after hearing of what took place at the Trianon's house [the Trianon was a witch, and the Voisin's friend]."

It is a fact that Mme de Montespan applied once more to the famed sibyl and promised her one hundred thousand crowns if she carried out this double attempt successfully. . . "Louis XIV", writes M. Funck-Brentano, in his thrilling book *L'Affaire des Poisons,* was to be poisoned first. The Voisin and her accomplices had thought of scattering magic powders, prepared according to the Black Book's formulas, on the King's clothes, or in a spot where he was to pass, the Demoiselle Desoeillets, a waiting-maid of Mme de Montespan, having stated that she could do this without difficulty." The King would then waste away and die. But on second thoughts the Voisin resolved upon what she thought was a surer way. Following the ancient cus-

tom of the kings of France, Louis XIV, on certain days, received in person the petitions presented by his subjects. Everybody was allowed in, irrespective of rank and social status. It was decided to smear the petition with the deadly powders. The King would touch it with his hands and expire instantly. The Trianon was to prepare the paper and the Voisin was to present it.

This criminal attempt met with failure. After a first — and unavailing — trip to Saint-Germain, where the King did not receive her, the Voisin planned to return on March 13th, 1679, but she was arrested on the 12th. Her evidence does not mention the proposed poisoning of the King and Mlle de Fontanges. On the other hand, her confederates were not as reticent, after her execution, and their testimonies concurred. In October of the year following, a transcription of their depositions was given to Louis XIV, who was terrified by their revelations and ordered the suspension of the sittings of the Chambre Ardente. On the 17th of the same month, Louvois wrote to La Reynie: "I hold the letters with which you have honoured me. *They were read to the King, who was deeply shocked.*"

Thus informed of his mistress' undeniable crime, its supreme infamy must indeed have transported him with indignation and filled

him with horror and disgust. Such was the woman whom he had loved! He had held in his arms a poisoner and a murderer of babes! . . . Surely, during that minute when his head was bowed with shame and remorse, he must have heard once more the thundering words of Bourdaloue's dreadful *Sermon on Lecherousness:* "Sire, the impure spirit is necessarily linked with all other vices and all vices are in its pay. *It is under its guidance that the murderer spills human blood, that perfidy prepares its poisons,* that calumny spreads its ingenious inventions, that injustice becomes all-powerful in its solicitations, that the miser lays by, and the spendthrift scatters his gold, *that sacrilege makes its attempts upon the most sacred lives.*" Mme de Montespan had committed all those crimes. Was he not responsible, he who had taken her away from her husband and surrendered her to that "impure spirit" inveighed against by the fiery preacher? He could see at last into what abysmal depths is tossed a heart abandoned to all the devils of lust. Whatever might be the consequences, he must escape from his sinful bonds!

It is beyond doubt that, in this first turmoil of wrath and confusion, he must have thought of banishing her for ever from his Court. He had long suspected her of the worst, and par-

ticularly since the beginning of the proceedings during which his name had been mentioned so often. They had had a most violent altercation. The measure was full. But the King was too deliberate and naturally prudent to make a scene and, by inflicting an exemplary punishment, to prolong a scandal that sullied the throne itself and reflected upon the highest nobility of France. He ordered that the *Chambre Ardente* cease its investigations and decided that the guilty woman, the mother of his children, far from being prosecuted, should even be allowed to remain at Court. It behoved the royal dignity that the King's mistress be not shown up as a criminal. She was requested, however, to leave her apartment. Apart from reasons of propriety, he shrank from the nearness of a poisoner.

Mme de Montespan remained at Court for a long time — ten years at least — as had La Vallière, but for less avowable motives. This last blow of fate had not chastened her. She still craved pleasure, money and honours for herself and her friends. In her innermost thoughts, she still caressed the obstinate hope of reconquering the King. At last, when her former lover — who, we are told, " despised " her — forced her to leave Court for ever, when she realized that the game was up and that all hope should be renounced of ever re-

gaining her place, she bethought herself of conversion, somewhat tardily, but with an evident sincerity, and with remorseful demonstrations that were quite terrifying. She appalled her contemporaries. What crimes must have been committed by this woman who could not find a penance harsh enough to atone for her past life, who wore hair-cloth next to her skin, who bruised her flesh with iron spikes and was so afraid of darkness that candles burned all through the night in her bed-chamber! What spectres haunted her sleepless hours? Did she see the pitiful phantoms of the little children who had given their blood for her and her covetous loves?

The King, on the contrary, was immediately converted on the very morrow of the Poison Case. Saint-Simon and a few others have stated that only his fear of the Devil caused him to abandon Mme de Montespan and brought him back to devoutness. This is true, in a sense, for the atrocities of his mistress had, in a way, revealed to his eyes the dreadful power of the Evil Spirit. He recoiled in terror and disgust. . . . Did he perhaps always remember that mystic meeting in the apartments or the streets of Versailles, which La Fare related to us? The Holy Sacrament brought to

one of his ailing officers? . . . Yes, indeed, he had never forgotten it. For to him too on that day the Saviour had presented Himself, and he had repulsed Him and returned to his sins!

Someone, however, happened to be there in the nick of time and benefited by this crisis of conscience. This person had kept her eye on him for a long time. She was the governess of Mme de Montespan's adulterine children, the lady whom he had recently created Marquise de Maintenon. Very closely watched and influenced by a group of pious persons and dignitaries of the Church, Mme de Maintenon was more than ever persuaded that her mission was to help the King to salvation by dragging him away from a scandalous adultery and from what the slang of the age called the commerce of women.

She began by obtaining from him a promise to settle down. The King was 42 years old, in all the vigour of his fiery temperament, and a violent return of his former passions could be expected at any time. However, his efforts were sincere and laudable. His life was ruled by a new sense of his dignity. Never had he been seen in the rôle of so kindly and attentive a husband and father. The Queen, both astonished and delighted at this change, attributed it to the clever and pious Maintenon

and thanked her for having brought back the King's love to her.

Then, one or two years after, the Queen died — and Europe marvelled at this extraordinary happening: Mme de Maintenon, the widow of a literary Bohemian, the former Mme Scarron, becoming the morganatic wife of the man who was the arbiter of the world.

This amazing adventure is perhaps the most mysterious episode in the sentimental life of the King. We shall now try to explain it.

III

LOST ILLUSIONS

MME DE MONTESPAN'S rise to renown had been sudden, dazzling and irresistible. On the other hand, Mme de Maintenon's fortune was tardy and had been hindered by a thousand obstacles, and even after having reached the pinnacle of glory, this woman, who had risen from poverty and obscurity, insisted on remaining in the shadow and modestly continuing her humble way.

A sentence which she wrote to her friend, Mme de Villarceaux, is frequently quoted. It was on the occasion of the triumphant entry into Paris, in August 1660, of Louis XIV and his bride, the *Infante* Marie Thérèse: " I do not believe that anything more beautiful could be seen and, on retiring last night, the Queen must have been much pleased with the husband she has chosen." This was twenty-five years before Mme de Maintenon's marriage to the King. Nevertheless, many authors have construed her words as a sort of declaration of love, and a first indication of all her future

destiny. According to them, Françoise d'Aubigné, the widow Scarron, dreamed even in those days of conquering the King; plotted the success of her plan, and firmly turned her steps towards this desired goal. Such retrospective inductions are easily made. But the truth is that there is nothing more mysterious and confused than the early stages of this alleged ambition. Nothing, in the words of Mme de Sévigné, could be more obscure than " the first volume of her life." When she became Queen of France, she used to say that she wished to remain an enigma to posterity. The fact is that her innermost thoughts are as closed to us as those of the King himself. Did this shy and retiring lady clearly see into her own soul? In what measure was she the builder of her fate? What we know of her childhood and girlhood unfortunately allows us to entertain grave suspicions with regard to her character and her conduct.

✣

The daughter of an adventurer and of a woman of humble social standing, left an orphan in her 'teens, she lived if not on public charity, at least at the expense of one or another of her friends. She was at first sheltered by more or less close relatives — Mme de Villette and Mme de Neuillant. The latter is

described by Saint-Simon as a miserly creature who jealously kept the keys of her granary and superintended in person the doling of her horses' oats. In this unpleasant home, the young Françoise is said to have been a veritable servant. Her enemies even said, in later days, that she was the village goose girl. And Saint-Simon, her most bitter defamer, concludes that the servile tasks of her childhood branded her for life and that she never succeeded in ridding herself of the traces of her lowly origin.

According to this same historian, Mme de Neuillant had married her to Scarron in order to rid herself of a hated dependent. The gouty *littérateur* was much older than his bride and could easily have been her father. She was seventeen years old, without a dowry, and knew naught but her province and her convent. Her decrepit husband said she had brought him only " two roguish eyes, a fair body, pretty hands and much wit! "

She adapted herself with a surprising ease to a milieu so different from that where she had lived until then. Scarron's household was the meeting place of all sorts of people. Bohemians of literature fraternized there with noble lords, and great ladies rubbed elbows with courtesans. The tone of the conversation and the ways of the *habitués* were not always edifying, and young Mme Scarron soon learned

to put up with this peculiar group without adopting their customs, and she never annoyed her husband's guests by any show of reserve or straitlacedness. This is one of the most persistent traits in her character. All through her life, this devout woman succeeded in passing through the most doubtful and equivocal situations without ever compromising herself, at any rate in a definite and irreparable way. Like the snow-white ermine of fable, she could skirt the most tainted ground without defiling herself. Perhaps we may find signs of a desire for self-justification in regard to her life with Scarron, in these lines which were written about her, almost it would seem at her own dictation, by her pupil, Mme de Caylus: " During Lent, she would sit at the foot of the table, eat a herring, and then retire to her room. She had realised that in view of her extreme youth any behaviour less strict or less austere than this would have the result that the licentiousness of these young people would become more unbridled and would be highly detrimental to her own reputation."

Thus, sitting not close to her husband, but at the foot of the table, she would take no part in the merry-making of the young people who frequented the house of the witty cripple. At least, she says so herself. But it seems probable that if her severe mien did not put any restraint

on her husband's companions, they, on the other hand, embarrassed her greatly. She could not sympathize with these jesters and scoffers, and so when she did not retire to her room, she would leave the conjugal domicile as frequently as possible. Scarron was far from approving of this, as shown in a letter which would be a terrible accusation against Françoise d'Aubigné, if we did not know the customary ill-humour of the husband and the habitual exaggeration of the burlesque poet. He wrote to the Duc d'Elbeuf: " A thousand thanks for remembering me, for all the pasties which you have sent me, and for the last one which I have just received. MM. de Vivonne, de Mata, d'Elbêne, Châtillon and I will carve it together. We will drank your health with enthusiasm, and the honour which you have done me shall fully console me for the absence of Mme Scarron whom Mme de Montchevreuil has taken away from me. I greatly feel that this lewd lady may accustom her to wine and women, and wear her out before she brings her back to me."

One dares not read between these cynical lines, but we must remember who Scarron was and not interpret them too literally. However, it is extremely probable that the old scamp tried to create in his wife the same tolerant attitude as that shown by his *entourage*.

Was he bragging when he said of her: " I will not do anything naughty to her, but I will teach her many naughty things "? At any rate, on the 28th of February 1678, Mme de Maintenon wrote to her brother this significant sentence: " I have never been married." Later again, in her conversation with the young ladies of Saint-Cyr, she said: " It would be difficult to foresee how far our husbands can carry their authority: with them, one must submit to certain things that would seem almost impossible." This indeed appears to confirm the boastfulness of Scarron.

It is a fact that many contemporaries of Mme de Maintenon were convinced that she had not spent, with impunity, ten years of her life in such company. The *gallant* chronicles of the time name as her lovers numerous friends of her husband: Villarceaux, Villars, Beuvron, d'Albret. . . Saint-Simon states unhesitatingly that she was kept by Villarceaux. And the famous lines of Ninon de Lenclos are often quoted: " Scarron was my friend. His wife charmed me with her conversation, and, at that time, I found her too awkward for love. As to details, I know nothing, I have seen nothing. But I have often loaned my yellow room to her and to Villarceaux." It is true, at least, that Villarceaux loved her madly and beset her with his atten-

tions for a long time, although she was the wife of his friend. But this great debauchee, this shameless courtier who, ten years later, offered to sell his niece to Louis XIV, never dared say that he had succeeded in his quest. Having given up all hope of her ever yielding, he is said to have had a full-length painting made of her, naked and resting on a bed after the bath, at which he gazed in strange and solitary pleasure. It is rumoured that this peculiar picture, which of course was not done from life, is still in existence. . .

No less positive a fact than Villarceaux' passion is that the young Mme Scarron lived with Ninon in the greatest intimacy. At a certain time, the two friends not only shared a room but even a bed. However, it is only fair to add that by then Ninon had already settled down. She was no longer the courtesan whose scandalous adventures had become a by-word among the gentry, but Mlle de Lenclos, who received the most fashionable characters about town and at Court. We must also add that it was the custom, in the 17th century, for sisters or friends to share a room and it frequently happened that many persons slept together in the same bed.

It is impossible to draw definite conclusions against the young woman's conduct from all these more or less meaningless details, and we

have only recalled them because they have been brought forward to incriminate Mme de Maintenon's morals. Ninon herself seems to have exculpated her in advance when she expressed this ambiguous opinion: " *Madame de Maintenon was virtuous through weak-mindedness. I tried to cure her, but she feared God too much.*"

Ninon appears to insinuate that her friend would have shared readily in the worst licentiousness had religious scruples not contended with her natural propensity. This victorious resistance to the call of the senses is properly called virtue. Mme Scarron was then virtuous — indeed, very virtuous — since she resisted both the impure suggestions and the discourses and example of her redoubtable friend. But can it be said that she found it difficult? Was her temperament so tyrannical that it could be held in leash only through the strongest material, moral, and religious constraint? It would appear, on the contrary, that this person with the " roguish eyes " and the " handsome body " was the coldest of women. No man, not even the King, could ever boast of having moved her heart or her senses.

Let us review her conduct after her husband's death. Scarron died in 1660. His widow was not more than twenty-five years old. She could try to remarry, or, if amorously

inclined, as Ninon suggested and as her calumniators asserted, she could have followed the example of her counsellor and friend and joined the ranks of the courtesans. Nothing kept her from doing so — she was free to act as she pleased. Villarceaux loved her still. Why did she not consent to be discreetly maintained by this faithful admirer, even if she were to have nothing but relations of friendship with him? Her husband had left her nothing. Poverty and eventual starvation stared her in the face! . . . However, she did not stray from the path which she had decided to follow. This pious woman retired forthwith to the convent of the Hospitalières of the Place Royale, then called the Charité-Notre-Dame or the " Little Charity."

So, at twenty-five, witty and pretty, with all the charms of the mind and the prestige of beauty, and having before her a most brilliant career, Mme Scarron boarded at the Charité! Her meals were practically given to her without charge, and her room had been loaned by the Maréchale d'Aumont, Scarron's cousin. She subsisted on alms. " At first," writes Tallement des Réaux, " the Maréchale even sent her clothes. But she told so many people that the widow was hurt and sent back to her a cartful of wood which the Maréchale had had unloaded in the convent yard. . ."

So, however poor, Mme Scarron still wished to retain her dignity and independence. She refused to be the poor relative to whom one sends worn toggery. While leading an exemplary life, truly meritorious in such a young woman, she meant to maintain the externals of dignity required by her station. Her sole ambition was to live modestly, but decently. And this is why she took steps at that time, with the *Surintendant* Fouquet, and subsequently with the Queen Mother, to obtain the reinstatement of a pension of three hundred crowns formerly granted to her husband. We are told by Mlle d'Aumale that the Queen raised it to two thousand crowns "*as a reward for her good conduct and the admiration which it caused.*"

The perfect correctness of the Widow Scarron's life is thus officially proved. This did not keep her enemies from later hinting that she had been expelled from the Charité on account of the scandal caused by her ways and misconduct. It is most probable that the nuns looked askance at an unprofitable boarder who had too many frivolous callers. Their coaches and sedan-chairs, the lackeys who followed them, their too worldly talk and the sumptuousness of their attire revolutionized the peaceful atmosphere of the convent. They must have devoutly prayed for the departure of this

distinguished and penniless woman who dared to have such magnificent acquaintances. But the determining cause of her setting out was that Mme Scarron, now entitled to a pension of two thousand crowns, found the Petite Charité somewhat unworthy of her rank and of her fashionable guests.

Her income of six thousand *livres* would have enabled her to live in the Marais or any other smart quarter, close to her wealthy friends. Again, she did nothing of the sort. She seemed to be avoiding a freedom which any other woman would have hastened to enjoy and from which she could have derived most substantial advantages. Mme Scarron, now a pensioner of the Queen, elected to reside in another convent, that of the Ursulines of the Faubourg Saint-Jacques, where she had once renounced Calvinism. She lived there as she had at the Charité, dividing her time between visits and the practice of piety. Perhaps was she already trying her hand at her future duties as spiritual adviser. Lines of coaches, belonging to the highest titled personages, blocked up the Rue Saint-Jacques. An endless stream of visitors marched past the turning-box of the nunnery. She herself was made welcome in the most exalted circles, and frequented especially the Duchesse de Richelieu and the Maréchale d'Albret. It was at the latter's

house that she met Mme de Montespan — an event of capital importance in her life and the prelude to her astounding fortune. Saint-Simon wrote that "M. and Mme de Montespan never budged from the Maréchale's house and it was there that she met Mme Scarron and took a liking to her. . ."

Whoever understands the discreet character of Mme de Maintenon may well imagine the demeanour of this young widow of humble station in so brilliant a company. But the maliciousness of her enemies delighted in exaggerating her wilful self-effacement and her desire to please and oblige. Again Saint-Simon writes: "In those houses, Mme Scarron was nothing less than a *companion-of-all-work* . . . she would ask for wood, or inquire whether a meal would be served presently, or again whether this or that coach had returned, and so run a thousand annoying little errands which the use of bells has since eliminated."

It is doubtful, in truth, whether Mme de Maintenon ever consented to lower herself to this rôle of maid-of-all-work. She wished her services to be appreciated and sought to bind those whom she had to deal with by a sort of vague gratitude. She surely must have performed those minor offices with great dignity and with a good grace, for she was wise enough to know that servility gains one noth-

ing. When circumstances required that she be humble, hers was a Christian and rational humility. Blinded by hatred, Saint-Simon was incapable of making such a distinction.

In short, if we try to picture her as she was during that first period of her life, we behold a woman ordinary on all points — her beauty may have been noticeable in youth (hence the " roguish eyes, handsome body and lovely hands " vaunted by her husband), but it faded and grew colder with each year; she had a reliable and judicious mind, culture, great common-sense, finesse, cunning and even charm, her conversation was more polished and affable than brilliant, and adorned with all possible acquired graces; she was extremely shrewd and artful, and a thorough woman of the world. Also, she was absolutely honest, devout without exaltation, reasonably and rationally devout, somewhat in the Huguenot way — temperamentally cold, undemonstrative and without ambition — in a word, an average woman.

After all, during the first part of her life, those " years of darkness " in the words of Saint-Simon, she was never an intriguer. Far from distractedly courting fortune, she led a calm and peaceful existence. Her desires seem to have tended no farther than to a modest pension with which to live in a decent manner

and to frequent such distinguished minds as might appreciate her natural conversational powers. Later, when her functions of governess to Mme de Montespan's children had, so to speak, given her a leg-up, she showed not the least desire for honours and money. For more than three years, she was contented with her pension of two thousand crowns, which was raised to six thousand in 1672 only. Finally, two years later, when the King granted her the promised reward of some two hundred thousand francs with which she was able to purchase the estate of Maintenon, her desires appeared to be fulfilled for, at last, her old age was assured of a retreat. It was then that she wrote to her brother: " I am negotiating the purchase of an estate, for which I have bid two hundred and forty thousand francs. Do not tell anyone yet, for boasting is unlucky. Farewell, dear brother, *I believe that our old age shall be happy enough,* although these two terms go ill together. . ."

Such was her only dream: a peaceful old age, a comfortable home, a few chosen friends and books. Thus is salvation earned placidly and at leisure. She disliked noise, bother, worry and the vain restlessness of Courts. She adored intimacy and the simple life (for she never forgot that she had been a country lass). She wanted leisure that she might look after her

health — both physical and spiritual. She wanted time to coddle herself and take a thousand precautions against illness, for she had but little faith in physicians and was fond of old women's nostrums.

And still, we find in this retiring and self-effacing woman, in this boarder at the Little Charity whom deluded persons consider as a combination of lady-companion and maid-of-all-work, an innate craving for domination, a sort of monomania of leadership, complicated by a latent pedantry. She reminds one of the mother-superior of a convent and the head-mistress of a boarding-school.

Queerly enough, it was at a school of vice that this paragon of virtue most probably learned to develop these as yet undiscovered qualities: we refer here to her strange intimacy with Ninon de Lenclos. The word *vice* is perhaps extreme when applied to Ninon — we should have said *pleasure* or *amiable corruption*. It would seem that Mme de Maintenon came into close contact with this dangerous friend without being in the least impressed by her example. She disregarded her moral and doctrinal libertinism, but learned from the great courtesan the art of mastering men through flattery and persuasion. She was taught that this art is easily applied after all. Ninon made her see at close range the vanity

and stupidity of most males, and that those who lay claim to a domineering will and mind end by giving in to the disintegrating sweetness of an obstinate feminine will.

Were it not for a certain similarity of soul and an identical craving for mastery — were it not also for the attraction of an assured moral profit with regard to her future conduct — the lengthy intimacy of Mme de Maintenon and Ninon de Lenclos would be difficult to explain . . . unless we give the Devil his due and lend an ear to Scarron's cynical insinuations.

Such was the future Mme de Maintenon when fortune appeared and led her by the hand to undreamed-of heights. Whatever part luck may have had in her rise, it was assisted by all the resourcefulness of an infinitely subtle and cunning intelligence, as soon as she foresaw how far circumstances might lead her.

Mme Scarron met Mme de Montespan frequently at the Maréchale d'Albret's house. She liked the fair Athénaïs and even tried to ingratiate herself with her. This may seem strange in a person whose policy it already was to gain ground on the strength of her piety and devoutness. She could not but know that the Marquise de Montespan was the King's mistress, and as such betrayed her husband in the

same way as the King betrayed his wife. She flattered her, however, because this Beautiful Lady was already all-powerful with her lover. She saw in Mme de Montespan the favourite whose help might be useful to a woman as needy as she was. Consequently, she resolved to be blind to the royal liaison. Besides, no one knew anything and all were bound to know nothing. Although a mystery to no one, the relations of the King and his new friend were surrounded with all the usual and proper secrecy. Like the Queen, Mme de Maintenon was, in principle, ignorant of their private misdemeanours. After all, this deliberate blindness might very well be construed as Christian charity. It is one of Mme de Maintenon's constant characteristics that her virtues and interest were never irreconcilable.

One fine day, in March 1669, she was requested to undertake the education of a natural child of the King and Mme de Montespan, a little girl who died in 1672, after the birth of the Duc du Maine. Was it the Marquise herself who asked the Widow Scarron to undertake this clandestine education? It appears hardly probable, in spite of the friendliness which already existed between them. The guilty wife's pride would not have allowed such an admission. It is more likely that the proposal was made by a mutual friend, Mme

d'Heudicourt, who, we are told, had the King's confidence.

What a fearful problem for the pious Mme Scarron's conscience! To accept the rôle of governess was to become a party to the double adultery of the King and the Marquise de Montespan. On the other hand, how could she refuse a service requested by such mighty persons? . . . No doubt her agitation sent her post-haste to her confessor, who, after due consideration, advised her to accept, by reason of the good that she might do both to the children and to the adulterous parents. Her educative duties would allow her to see the King and Mme de Montespan quite frequently and on a certain familiar footing. Charming, clever at wheedling, as she was, what useful truths could she not tell the guilty couple! She could even perhaps lead them back to the paths of virtue! . . . Moreover, this position of trust with a powerful favourite would doubtless teach many things to a clever and discreet person and help her to obtain many benefits. Obviously, she would do wisely by consenting to bring up the King's bastards. . .

Morals, however, forbade her to pass over the " double adultery " and, in a manner of speaking, to become conjointly answerable for it. This is why Mme Scarron refused to hear from Mme de Montespan and stated that

she would listen to the King's requests alone. She would not be a party to a sin which it was her duty to ignore. But, as a loyal subject, she would obey the King who commanded her to take charge of the education of an illegitimate child. Thus did she accept the position only on condition that the order came to her direct from Louis XIV himself. In the main, this was much better for her tranquillity and security. In such conditions, she depended on the King alone and not on the whims of an unstable and ever-erratic favourite. Besides, a woman always prefers taking orders from a man. Finally, her acceptance put the King *under obligation* to her, and doubtless he would not forget it. . . He began by promising her a gratuity of one hundred thousand *livres*, payable when she should relinquish her charge.

Such are the reasons which apparently decided Mme de Maintenon to assume the duties of governess. The religious motives assuredly carried the most weight. This sincerely pious woman meant *to do good* in the position which she was to fill. She might even perhaps stop the scandal by getting the lovers to separate? . . . Let us add that this occupation gave Mme Scarron full scope to exercise her pedagogical talents and satisfy her mania for command. Besides, her feminine instincts seem to have awakened at the thought of contending

with another woman under the eyes of a man — and of a man whom she wished to please. No doubt, in her innermost heart, she hoped already to triumph over her rival. . .

From the very first day, one may say that the duel between these two had commenced.

Historians tell us that, from July 1668, Mme Scarron lived at the Marais, Rue des Trois-Pavillons, a step from the Albret mansion, where she met Mme de Montespan. Had she, at that time, definitely quitted the Ursulines' convent and, foreseeing the Marquise's confinement, settled in the neigbourhood of a friendly house in order to communicate constantly with her without rousing curiosity? At any rate, it was then that she undertook the thankless task of watching over the royal babes.

She soon discovered that many difficulties awaited her. The most painful was to be forced to resort to countless evasions in order to hide her true occupation from her acquaintances. What a grave responsibility it was to bring up His Majesty's little daughter, practically an orphan, since she had been separated from her mother! And still, in the eyes of her friends, the child's governess remained none other than merely Mme Scarron, an idle widow, whose time was shared among numer-

ous worldly pleasures. She has described, in her *Entretiens,* her tribulations and fatigue at that time: "*Often did I walk* from nurse's house to nurse's house, *disguised,* carrying under my arm linen, meat, etc. Sometimes, I would spend the whole night with one of the children who was ill, in a little house, outside of Paris. I would return home in the morning, let myself in through a back-door, dress, come out through the front-door, get into my coach, and call on Madame d'Albret or Madame de Richelieu, in order that my friends should not notice anything or even suspect that I had a secret in my keeping. . ."

It was only during the summer of 1670 that the two children were reunited in a large and isolated house, surrounded by gardens, at the end of the Rue de Vaugirard. One can say that, from that time, Mme Scarron's friends saw her no more. All this sort of thing must have been extremely distasteful to her. She loved quiet and comfort — a deep armchair, by the fireside, behind closed doors. And she had *to foot it* from nurse to nurse, spend nights with an ailing brat, and abandon all her elegant friends for this mercenary business! . . .

She had not reached the end of her troubles! She had been retained to bring up a little girl — and a little boy was brought to her the next

year, soon followed by others, for we must not forget that Mme de Montespan, officially, bore seven children to the King. The governess' cares kept increasing, and the devout Mme Scarron's conscience protested against this reiterated scandal. Far from bringing the double adultery to an end, her kindness had encouraged it: its fruits grew and multiplied. What shame and what remorse thus to be unwillingly associated with the King's and his mistress' sin! . . .

To these torments of her conscience we must add the frequent scenes that Mme de Montespan had with her children's governess, her violent fits of temper, and above all her perfidy. No kindness could be expected from her. The Beautiful Lady treated the Widow Scarron like a serf and squabbled with her over a hundred points of service, education, medicine, and diet. She accused her of alienating her children's love. The poor woman tried to bear all this in silence, but finally she lost patience. In September 1674, after five years of this nerve-racking life, she wrote to her confessor, the Abbé Gobelin: "I cannot admit that it is God's will that I should suffer through Mme de Montespan. *She is incapable of friendship* and I cannot do without. We differ on so many points that she is bound to hate me. Her attacks are causing me to lose the

King's esteem. He looks upon me as a slightly mad woman who must be humoured. I dare not talk to him directly, because she would never forgive me, and even if I did, my debt to her is such that I could not talk against her. Thus I cannot remedy my sufferings. . ."

This letter is extremely interesting because it allows us to catch a glimpse of the struggle between the two women. One may guess that Mme de Maintenon tried to gain over and make a friend of her rival, the more easily to bring her to mend her ways. But the fair Athénaïs, who doubtless smelled a rat, would have nothing of it. She wanted Mme Scarron to remain in her place. Scandalized at each new birth, and disheartened by such ill-treatment, the governess would threaten to quit. But the Marquise, who could not do without her, would ask the King to talk to Mme Scarron as her master and command her to take charge of another ward. In despair, she would obey, without prevailing on him in any way, for he was prejudiced against her and thought her an impossible creature, "slightly mad", who should be humoured because he needed her services. . . .

Finally, Mme de Maintenon complained to the King. It happened after a particularly violent scene which she has described herself in a letter written to the Abbé Gobelin on Ash

Wednesday, February 27th, 1675: "Terrible things are taking place here between Madame de Montespan and me. The King was a witness yesterday, and these rows, together with the constant ailments of the children, have brought me to a state which I shall soon be unable to bear. . ."

And here is what took place, as narrated by one of her pupils to whom she had described the affair, at Saint-Cyr: "One day, Mme de Maintenon being alone with Mme de Montespan, the King surprised them in the midst of a most violent scene and asked what the matter was. Very coolly, Mme de Maintenon answered him: 'If Your Majesty please to come into this other room, I shall have the honour to tell him.' The King assented and Mme de Maintenon followed him. Mme de Montespan remained alone. When Mme de Maintenon saw that she was alone with the King, she hid nothing from him and vividly described Mme de Montespan's harshness and severity. She told him clearly her misgivings for the future. Most of those facts were known to the King. But, as he loved her still, he tried to pacify Mme de Maintenon. . ."

So the governess had made up her mind to speak to the master. She had done so openly, within sight and hearing of her persecutor. But she discovered that the King was com-

pletely under the dominion of his mistress and that, most probably, he would not dare resist her. How heart-breaking! Far from having caused the adulterous wife to repent, she had only succeeded in aggravating her animosity. Her aim — the separation and eventual conversion of the lovers — seemed farther off than ever. Why then should she persist in her endeavour? She had just been rewarded for her services. The King had given her the estate of Maintenon and assured that " happy old age " which she craved. Why did she postpone her resignation? . . .

It seems probable that the influence of the Abbé Gobelin and the devout clan was powerful enough to persuade her to stick to her guns. Since she had no influence on Mme de Montespan, she should continue to deal with the King! She should share in this pious conspiracy which, headed by Bossuet, was aiming at the King's definite separation from his mistress. The King's salvation was Mme de Maintenon's mission. Could she forget it and betray the heavenly designs? . . . This sincerely devout woman could only bow before their exhortations, and all the more willingly since it flattered secretly her domineering instincts and her desire to take revenge upon a triumphant rival.

Mme de Maintenon has been much criti-

cized for having taken part in this little conspiracy against a person to whom, after all, she was indebted for everything. It would be a mistake, however, to attribute this to jealousy or feminine perfidy. Even if her decision involved some half-formed desire to humiliate the haughty Marquise, she thought it her duty to reconcile the two culprits with the Church.

The result of the intrigue is known. The King performed his Easter duties at the parish church of Versailles, and Mme de Montespan was asked to stay away from Court.

Later, the governess of the royal bastards left for Barèges, where the young Duc du Maine was to undergo a treatment. . . . When she returned, Mme de Montespan had come back into favour, she occupied her apartment at Versailles, and salvation did not worry the King in the least. Everything had to be started over again.

The methods of Mme de Maintenon's campaign of penetration were now watched with shrewd appraising eyes by the Court experts. With masterly strategy, she expended an infinity of patience, ingenuity and skill to secure the King's confidence. In spite of all the insults and fury of the Beautiful Lady, the governess held the fort. Henceforth, no more scenes, no more despair — outwardly at least. To the guilty lovers, she spoke the language

of duty and religion. She convinced them — at any rate, she convinced the King — of her absolute disinterestedness: their welfare and salvation were her only concern.

Enraged as the Marquise must have been at all this preaching, the consequences of which could be so disastrous to her, she was forced to confess that Mme de Maintenon spoke wisely and that she was right. In the same way, the King, being made to see the scandal which he caused, had to admit that, besides trampling his Christian duty under foot, he was also violating one of the essential rules of his political conduct — that of avoiding scandal. And this call to order was disguised with such a magic spell of flattery that he was gradually won over. Her work was that of the drop of water which eventually bores through a rock. It took her five or six years. However, great as Mme de Maintenon's influence may have been, she probably would have failed had the " poison case " not cropped up. Louis XIV's decision to leave Mme de Montespan hinged on the proof that his mistress had tried to poison him.

Did Mme de Maintenon know of the awful accusations that had been made against her rival? That seems quite possible. Many unpleasant rumours were abroad. If so, we may imagine with what inexorable severity the de-

vout lady made use of her longed-for victory. Her enemy was definitely checkmated. She held her at her mercy — their rôles were inverted. Quivering with suppressed fury, Athénaïs struggled hard to caress and appease the woman whom she hated so bitterly. Cold as duty itself, the subtle Maintenon received her overtures with the chilly superiority of Christian forgiveness. On the 27th of May 1681, she wrote to the Marquis de Montchevreuil: " To-day, Mme de Montespan and I went walking together, *arm in arm, chatting and laughing. We are no better friends for all that* ".

An interesting picture! The overthrown favourite embracing her rival who, smilingly scornful, enjoyed seeing her at her feet. Well she knew that it was she who now possessed the secret as well as the mind of their royal master.

How did it happen? By what allurements had this forty-year-old pedagogue, his senior by three years and a canting bigot, captured this sensuous and licentious fellow? It seems all the more strange, for Louis XIV had felt at first nothing but antipathy towards the stiff and prudish lady.

Mme de Montespan had described her as an impossible character, a touchy and peevish

creature, with whom one could not help quarrelling ceaselessly, and who made life hard for all who approached her. Moreover, Mme Scarron's former relations with the *Précieux* had left their mark — her simpering and old-fashioned ways amused the King and irritated him at the same time.

The governess knew well enough what impression she created. In later years she told her pupils at Saint-Cyr: " The King did not like me, and at first he was quite distant. He feared my turn of mind and imagined that I was too fastidious and only interested in sublime things. . ." Such a disposition would of course have annoyed Louis XIV, who was the most positive and earthly of men. He thought the *précieuse* Mme Scarron too celestial, too much in the clouds. He had the same grievance against Fénelon, whom he called a dreamer, unmindful of the realities of life. As to Mme de Maintenon, his flair had not misled him. Beyond her personal interests, her ideas on education and her wish to manage everything and everybody, she was liable to lapse into pure ideology: she supposed that a kingdom as vast as France could be ruled according to the same principles and regulations as a convent. But there was something else in the King's original feeling of mistrust about Mme de Maintenon. Doubtless, this man, who

was as positive in love as in politics, feared in this belated *précieuse* the romantic platonism so dear to the pretty ladies of the generation contemporaneous with the *Régence*. To sum up, his first impression was that Mme Scarron was a pretentious goose.

She was not long in seeing that this unfortunate impression must be dispelled. But this " witch ", as Saint-Simon calls her, had more than one trick in her bag. He did not love her, so she began by winning his pity. Her downcast, modest attitude contradicted the insinuations of Mme de Montespan, who described her as touchy and acrimonious. Then, after gaining the King's confidence, she deplored with him the violence and rages of the Marquise, which perhaps disturbed him more than they did her. The two victims of temper comforted one another. And, with supreme cunning, the governess appeared magnanimously to forgive her tormentor. Always in love, in spite of all, with the terrible Athénaïs, the King nevertheless admitted that this newcomer, notwithstanding her faults, had many qualities. One day, while trying to make her bear with patience the irritability of his mistress, he said to Mme de Maintenon: " Did you not notice that her beautiful eyes fill with tears when anyone relates a generous and soul-moving action? . . ."

Indeed, Mme de Montespan could weep with admiration, but she more often wept with rage, and the King would come upon her in that deplorable state. A peaceful and methodical man, Louis XIV hated scenes. He was a home body who, after rising from his work-table, would have liked to relax in the intimacy of a lovely and intelligent woman. Instead of that, he had to deal with a termagant. What a contrast with the kind and ever-smiling Maintenon!

Her task was not always easy. Ceaselessly she had to conquer her natural inclinations, to hide her own feelings, her anguish and her bitterness — and show a serene face to the master. In later years, she wrote to one of her intimates, Mme de Brinon: "When the King returns from the hunt, he comes to see me. The door is then closed to every one. I am alone with him, and I must cheer him up, hear his tales of woe and soothe his nerves. At times, he starts to cry, and cannot stop. Or, if he feels unwell, he refuses to talk. . . ."

But she had worse things to contend with. When the King was in a rage, or even in bad humour, he would use her roughly, load her with reproaches and turn down her requests. She had to make the best of a bad bargain. "My life," she writes, "has been a veritable miracle. *To think that I was born impatient and that*

the King never noticed it, although I have often felt that I had reached the end of my tether and was ready to quit everything! To think that I was born truthful, and that I had to lie through all the first years of my favour! Sometimes I would be angry when the King would not grant me what I asked for my relatives and my friends. But I thank the Lord that I was twenty-six years without uttering one word that would show vexation. Sometimes, I would be furious, and ready to leave Court. God alone knows how I have suffered in those days! The King would come into my room and I would hide my true feelings and try to appear in good humour. All I wished was to amuse him and take him away from the women, and I could not have done so had he not always found me obliging and even-tempered. Not finding his pleasure in me, he would have sought it elsewhere. I would reflect that God had not put me in that state to make him suffer, but to try to sanctify him. That made me resolve to hide my annoyance when he refused me anything. . ."

Not only had she to try to cheer and console the King, who had a thousand family cares, took to heart his royal task, and was profoundly worried by the slightest political reverses, but she also had to amuse him and keep his mind busy. Completely absorbed by his

duties, Louis XIV had practically no inner life. Once he had left his desk or the council-room, he was bored. To amuse him was an overwhelming task! It called for all the art of a skilfully prepared conversation, for all the cleverness and wit of Mme de Maintenon. She spent thirty-five years of her life in amusing the King.

Louis XIV loved her because she rescued him from boredom, and also for the charm of her society and the peace and tranquillity with which she surrounded him. This was delightful after the stormy atmosphere which enveloped the Montespan.

And the widow and he had more than one trait of character in common. Good sense and straight thinking distinguished them both. The King detested feminine frivolousness, instability and absurdity. Mme de Maintenon, on her part, had virile qualities.

Louis XIV called her "Your Solidity." — "What does Your Solidity think? . . ." She could control herself, and she could keep a secret, two qualities that the King appreciated very highly. And she had, like him, a taste, not to say a mania, for detail. Her fussiness smacked of the governess. This was hidden under an air of seriousness and austerity. But all this was far from displeasing to Louis XIV. La Fare, describing the young monarch in his

Memoirs, recalls his " austere and pedantic " character. If this be true, we must admit that the King recognized himself even in the defects of Mme de Maintenon.

He was particularly attracted by her piety, which was deep and true without being forbidding. He was, at that time, going through that crisis of remorse which we have described above. It is certain that Mme de Maintenon helped him strongly in that instance and assisted him with all her power in settling down and leading a life which should be an inspiration to his subjects. At that time, he was still upset and terrified by the discovery of the Montespan's criminal manœuvres. He had seen the fearful power of the Evil Spirit. Mme de Maintenon had a good opportunity to appropriate and to mould his confused mind. True, her conduct at this juncture may be variously interpreted. Her pious zeal was being directed, not exactly against a rival, but certainly against a woman who had made her suffer and whose place she was about to take. Can she possibly have been in ignorance of the true situation? Can she have failed to realize that this repentant sinner was not only a catechumen, but also a friend who was not far from becoming a lover? . . . It is quite impossible not to find all this somewhat unpleasant and disturbing. But we repeat that it was

a constant and almost providential trait of Mme de Maintenon's career that her piety and that which she believed to be her duty should always be concurrent with her interests.

Besides being a preacher of morals, Mme de Maintenon was also for the King a professor of religion. Louis XIV had neither the time nor the wish to delve into the questions of religious controversy which, at that time, enthralled the most cultured and learned circles in his kingdom. Neither was it his affair to immerse himself in the heavy tomes of Arnaud, Quesnel, Bossuet or Fénelon. He preferred practical demonstrations and instructive conversations. Mme de Maintenon helped him by bringing within his reach the complicated theories of Jansenism and Quietism. She even went farther: she tried to teach him devoutness and to open to him the horizons of spirituality. . .

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However, all the advantages, all the charms and seductive qualities which Louis XIV found in Mme de Maintenon do not explain how he made up his mind to marry her.

By an extraordinary chance, the period of this clever woman's highest favour coincided with the death of the Queen. On the morrow of this catastrophe, Mme de Montespan, who

knew the King's temperament better than anyone else, is quoted as having said: " He must be married again as soon as possible! " But to whom? There was no princess in Europe, at that time, of an age and station befitting a bride of the King of France. And even if he had found one, he would have remembered the sad experience through which he had gone with his legitimate consort. The Infante, who assuredly had been a lady of many qualities, had cruelly demonstrated that the daughters of kings are not all endowed with charm and intelligence. Louis XIV had no desire to renew the attempt. After having given legitimate heirs to the Crown, and for twenty-three years fulfilled his husbandly duties with passable correctness, he believed that he had a right to choose a wife who pleased him. Was he to fall once more under the thraldom of a mistress? Mme de Montespan had cured him for life, and besides, Mme de Maintenon would not have entertained the suggestion. Even the rôle of platonic favourite would have awakened suspicion. What was he to do? . . .

The King wished to settle down, decidedly so, and also to take unto himself a wife of his own choosing. The Abbé de Choisy allows us to understand that this choice was based upon dynastic reasons: " The King " says he, " did not wish to remarry out of love for his

people. He had three grandsons, and wisely thought that the princes born to a second wife might eventually be the cause of civil wars. On the other hand, he could not do without women. Mme de Maintenon attracted him very much. Her intelligence and charm made him anticipate agreeable ties. . . She was still handsome, and her age excluded the possibility of children."

All these reasons evidently led Louis XIV to believe that Mme de Maintenon would be an ideal wife. But what a misalliance! Except in cases where his passions were concerned, he was strongly prejudiced on the question of birth, and Mme de Maintenon did not even belong to the first nobility, like Mme de Montespan. . . . His confidants anxiously tried to make him understand the shocking character of such a marriage — particularly since it would be proclaimed officially to all Europe. Louvois threw himself at his master's feet and implored him not to commit such a breach of the proprieties and tradition. . . Was the Most Christian King to recognize the Widow Scarron as the Queen of France? What a scandal it would be in all the ancient Courts and through the length and breadth of the kingdom! His most fearless courtiers stood aghast. So Louis XIV, whose rule was to avoid all unnecessary uproar, resorted to a

middle term. He did not recognize Mme de Maintenon as Queen of France — but he married her. He married her because he loved her and thought that he could not do without her. There is no other explanation for this action which, in spite of all the palliation and discretion which surrounded it, gave rise to unanimous protests.

Louis XIV loved Mme de Maintenon — in the most ordinary and conjugal sense of the word. He was not the man to turn up his nose at a woman's physical charms. Although she was well past her forty-eighth year, it seems probable that all her good looks had not disappeared, and that the " roguish eyes " and " handsome body " mentioned by her first husband had not as yet passed into the realm of things forgotten. And thus, in a room at Versailles, in the presence of the Archbishop of Paris, of Bontemps, his elderly servant, and of a few intimate friends, the arbiter of Europe was married by the Père de la Chaise to the widow of Scarron the rhymer. Mme de Maintenon became a queen without a title, the Most Christian Queen, and, as such, the protector of the Church and one of the pillars of Christendom. Popes were to address her as " our dear daughter in Jesus-Christ, the noble Madame de Maintenon . . ." and bestow upon her the Rose of Gold, as if she were a queen.

One may well imagine the emotion of this woman who, from complete obscurity and absolute poverty, had gradually risen to the pinnacle of glory! We see her as Esther, become the favourite of Ahasuerus, and returning thanks to Heaven, in the secrecy of her private chapel:

> . . . O, my most gracious Majesty,
> Behold me all trembling, alone before thee! . . .

What reflections must she have made on the mystery of human destiny, and her own in particular! How she must have thought herself, more and more, a living enigma! And how delightful to be one! But also, what terror when she looked into the future and saw there the fearful obligations that were to weigh her down! . . . And all mingled and merged with loud professions of humility and a total surrender to God's will. . .

At best, her marriage is difficult to explain. The sort of fascination which this elderly woman exercised on a man still young is mysterious in the extreme. We shall try, however, to point out its most apparent reasons.

The King married Mme de Maintenon because, firstly, he thought that he would find in her an associate. By principle, he mistrusted women in matters of government and

believed that they should intervene neither in state affairs nor even in appointments of minor importance. His ideas on this subject were very clear and definite and he has formulated them eloquently in his *Memoirs:* " The heart of a prince is attacked like a stronghold. Our first care should be to occupy all the posts through which it may be approached. A clever woman always endeavours to remove all that which is against her interests. She suggests suspicions and creates dislikes, so that she and her friends alone may hold our confidence. Unless we be forewarned, we displease everyone in order that she alone may be pleased. . . . Finally, sooner or later, without our having noticed that we have lost or disgusted our most trusty friends and followers, she succeeds in all her plans. This can be avoided in one way only, and that is *to forbid women to discuss any subject which is not purely frivolous and to make up our mind never to believe them when they discuss our affairs or our household.* . . ." Louis XIV was upon his guard with Mme de Maintenon as he had been with his mistresses, but he was convinced that his new companion was an exception amongst women and that she had a truly virile mind. She had tact and good sense and was even capable, at times, of proving herself to be a fair politician. She showed it

in her answer to a *mémoire* of Vauban who wanted to know whether the decree of revocation of the Edict of Nantes should be recalled. " Her Solidity " — as the King and his courtiers and friends called her — could occasionally give a sound bit of advice.

The King expected nothing more. Her opinion might be asked for, in certain difficult cases, merely on the grounds of her prudence, impartiality and uprightness, but she must not try to meddle with government. The religious party that had stood by her, helped her on, and perhaps led her to the point which she had reached, would have liked her to share more actively and efficaciously in the affairs of the kingdom. At times, she yielded to their requests because she thought that such was her duty. But the King, always very sensitive and jealous of his authority, would soon put her in her place with a brutal: " What business is that of yours? . . ."

Even in the case of some honorary position or candidature to a Court post, the master was so suspicious of all suggestion that Mme de Maintenon had to resort to the most subtle guile in order to make him appoint the person whom she had chosen. In the King's opinion, a frank declaration of interest in anyone was sufficient cause to set him or her aside. Mlle d'Aumale writes in her *Souvenirs:* " She

did not want us to be aware of all the King's refusals, for fear that we should blame him. She met with many a check. He disliked most of her relatives and friends. In spite of that, all those who had favours to ask wanted her to be their spokesman — not only her relatives, but everybody at Court, beginning with the princes. *We believed that she had a finger in every pie.* I have often seen her receiving thanks for some grant bestowed by the King — a governorship, a pension, an abbacy, a bishop's see. She would turn to me and say: ' I did not know he had got it. Things might be different if I had tried to get it for him. . .' "

This is it exactly: " *We believed that she had a finger in every pie* ". It explains the contradictory statements of various contemporaries concerning Mme de Maintenon's political influence. She kept repeating that she had no influence, but no one would believe her. Everyone said, unhesitatingly: " The destiny of the State is decided in her room. The King locks himself in there every day, when he returns from his promenade, and remains until ten o'clock, when he goes to supper. M. de Pontchartrain, the general controller of finance, is with him. Mme de Maintenon spins in a corner, seemingly inattentive, but the King turns to her at each proposal of the minister,

and says: " What do you think of that, Madame? " Modestly, she states her opinion and whatever she says is done. . . Let us note the word " proposals ". Doubtless, the writer refers to proposals of pensions, made by the controller of finance, and not to political plans. The King relied upon Mme de Maintenon's uprightness and thought that he should consult her on such matters. Nothing could be more natural and plausible.

But it has been said that she went further and really exerted an influence on the King's politics. Her presence was cited at the meeting held to deliberate over the Duc d'Anjou's acceptance of the Spanish succession. We should not forget that this Council of State was really a family council, attended by the heir presumptive, and that it was Mme de Maintenon's right and duty to be present as the King's consort. During the war that followed, she was used as intermediary between the French and Spanish courts. It was the Princesse des Ursins, then *camerera mayor*, who unofficially led the Spanish government. The King of France could not deal formally with this petticoated minister. Mme de Maintenon, a friend of the princess, was the necessary liaison between Versailles and Madrid. At the princess' request, she had to intervene in various nominations of diplomats and generals

whom the King must choose not only according to his personal tastes and judgment but also so as not to ruffle the Court of Spain. It has been shown by Mgr Baudrillart, in a masterly essay, that all his nominations, if not excellent, were at least the only possible ones.

On the whole, her influence can only be traced in the Council of Conscience, which granted episcopalates and ecclesiastical benefits. And there again it must be admitted that the nominations made through her were as wise as circumstances allowed and truly inspired by the interests of religion and the common weal. It is reasonable to see in Mme de Maintenon more than a mere distributor of ecclesiastical favours. Indeed, Louis XIV found in her a veritable Minister of Religious Affairs.

Thus did the King remain faithful to the promise which he had made to himself, at the beginning of his reign, to deprive his mistresses and even his wife (for, after all, Mme de Maintenon was his wife) of all political influence. He wanted her to collaborate with him, but only as a wise and judicious friend, devoted to the welfare of the State, and capable of warning her husband and sovereign of the wiles and artifices of his ministers or of his courtiers. He was surrounded by a permanent conspiracy to prevent truth from reaching his eyes or his ears. Mme de Maintenon would be

the guardian who would watch untiringly for any plots and denounce the lies of disloyal servants. And that is why the King gradually adopted the custom of working in her room with one or another of his ministers.

Saint-Simon has described this scene frequently, and so realistically that we actually behold it. In one corner of the fireplace, Mme de Maintenon is seated in a red damask wing-chair, for fear of draughts. Before her is a table, on which is a sewing-basket. The old witch still spins by the fire as she did, when a little girl, at the Château de Neuillant, or works at a sampler. In the other corner, his back to the wall, the King is seated in an arm-chair before another table flanked by two stools — one for the minister who is to work with him, the other for his despatch-case. The King and his minister chat together and exchange opinions, while the old lady, ambushed in her crimson recess, presses the treadle of her spinning-wheel. She spins — carefully and austerely — without lifting her head, like one of the fatal sisters spinning the kingdom's destiny. Absorbed with her task, one would think her both deaf and blind. But neither the words nor the most fleeting expression of the minister escape her. Mentally, she confronts his speech with what she knows of his true feelings, for she has secret agents who in-

form her of the innermost thoughts of every one. The King does the same and, when they are alone, they compare notes and make sure whether they have been deceived. The old minx tells her friend what she thinks of this remark of Chamillart or that statement of Pontchartrain; she recalls a gesture, a shrug of impatience, a nod, a sign of joy or disappointment which she has caught from her red silk sentry-box. Such are the continuous and secret services which the King expects from her. He believes that her mere presence will be enough to fill his interlocutor with a healthy dread and that this servant of the State, feeling himself doubly watched, will yield less easily to the temptation to cheat.

Thus, as in his youth, does the King continue to rein in and curb his ministers. There is no other explanation for his mania for making them work under the eyes of Mme de Maintenon. She was, to them, a terrifying overseer.

He also expected to find in her the reciprocal confidence and absolute devotion which he had vainly sought in his mistresses. He wanted, within his reach, a faithful heart to which he might relieve himself of the sorrows and cares that stifled him. When the war news was bad, when the couriers brought disquieting or tragic despatches, when he contemplated the

levying of onerous taxes that would cause an uproar, the King could not sleep and anguish bound him fast. Master of his soul, he did not show his alarms to those who surrounded him. Superficial observers thought him unfeeling and wondered at his calm in the midst of the worst trials. At the same time, Mme de Maintenon wrote to the Princesse des Ursins: " The King's health and courage are bearing up, *but he suffers at heart, and all the more since he shows it less* ". She ought to have known, for the exhausted autocrat rested his burden on her compassionate shoulders. He did not hide even his weaknesses from her. When things looked darkest for the kingdom, he wept in her presence and begged her for a word of comfort. What a tragic spectacle was this royal anguish! What a task, for her who had been called the goose-girl, was this of consoling the King of France! . . .

So, by the will of the King and the grace of God — discreetly helped by His ministers — Mme de Maintenon had become, in effect, a queen.

She was not through with intrigues and struggles. One might even say that they were just beginning. She now had to maintain herself in a post which was not official, reached through favour and to be held through favour

alone. Louis XIV was neither a capricious monarch nor — despite assertions to the contrary — was he easily influenced. But he was extremely susceptible, readily displeased and, once displeased, seldom changed his mind. The new Queen soon perceived it, and humiliations came thick and fast, and her restive husband promptly put her in her place whenever she threatened to become too important. They nearly came to a parting of the roads on the subject of Fénelon, with whom Mme de Maintenon had at first been much infatuated and whom she had helped to become Archbishop of Cambrai. Louis XIV was exasperated by the controversy over Quietism, in which the new archbishop had been rather awkwardly involved. The Ladies of Saint-Cyr tell us that "the King did not mince matters with Mme de Maintenon on the subject of her blind friendship for Fénelon. He blamed her severely for having made him appoint a man who could create in the midst of his Court a large and dangerous party. . ."

Not only was the King's affection not always dependable, but she was also surrounded with all sorts of enemies. The most dangerous, naturally enough, was Mme de Montespan, who had remained at Court and still occupied her rooms at Versailles in spite of her fall from

favour. Anything might be expected from this violent and ambitious woman. She would use any weapon, including poison. It is quite probable that Mme de Maintenon was aware of the revelations made by the Voisin's daughter before the members of the *Chambre Ardente*. One may well imagine her alarms while her rival was her neighbour. And she also knew that the Montespan, with her children as supreme argument, still hoped to win over the King. Thus was she brought to lean more and more on the Duc du Maine, eldest of the royal bastards. With far-seeing wisdom, the witch of the spinning-wheel had won the love of the " baby duke ", as she called him, hoping that he might some day defend her against his own mother. She laid her plot so well that her ward became the King's best beloved child. An alliance, not to say a fairly wicked complicity, united the former governess and the master's favourite bastard. Through this baby duke, she checkmated the mother and held the King. Nevertheless, she was uneasy until her rival was definitely sent away from Court, " turned off " ignominiously, writes Saint-Simon, who never minces words. According to him, it was the Duc du Maine who settled matters abruptly by putting his mother out of Versailles and throwing her furniture into the street.

Although rid of the wily Athénaïs, Mme de Maintenon still had to contend with the ministers, the confessors, the members of the royal family and the princes of the blood. Death relieved her of the terrible Louvois, who had so strongly opposed her marriage with the King. She did all she could to annihilate the influence of the Père de la Chaise until she found in the Père Tellier a substitute after her own heart.

Daquin, the King's first physician, had been appointed through Mme de Montespan; she had him dismissed and replaced by Fagon, who had once accompanied her to Barèges. At the same time, she must have had spies in the households of Madame and her son, the Duc d'Orléans, who both hated her cordially, and at Mendon, where Monsieur, the heir presumptive, was already surrounded with quite a court of his own — in a word, wherever the least semblance of a plot might have threatened her power.

Hence the unfortunate woman had to face constant worry, besides the daily heavier and more difficult task of keeping the King amused. She was not equal to it, and had recourse to the demure charms and youthful frolics of the Duchesse de Bourgogne to retain the blasé monarch. . . Moreover, she was growing old and was often ailing. She wondered anx-

iously how long she could fulfill what her spiritual directors called her " mission ".

The robust Louis XIV disliked the halt, the lame and the sick. Mme de Maintenon was perpetually ill; she enjoyed muffling up her throat, rubbing her rheumatic legs, talking of her clysters, nostrums and oil of Saint-Francis. This was one of the first subjects of discord between husband and wife, for, not content with being sick, she also wanted everyone else to be the same. This exasperated the King, who was only happy in the open air, hunting, riding to hounds or travelling. Draughts terrified her, but he drove with coach-windows wide open, whether in torrid or freezing weather. Frightened and worn out by his whims, Mme de Maintenon alleged her chest was delicate, and finally was allowed to travel alone, in her coach or chaise, both being carefully closed. When the King, who accompanied her on foot on her airings, wished to speak to her, she would lift the glass pane an inch or two and immediately put it down for fear of catching cold. The poor valetudinarian would much rather have stayed by the fireside, in her bed or her wing-chair.

To this end, she resorted to a hundred tricks. When the King wished to drag her after him to Marly or Fontainebleau, with the princesses,

she would ask Fagon, her physician, who could improvise on a sudden countless imaginary ailments, to report her real or feigned indisposition to the King, who would usually give in. Being very suspicious, he would occasionally detect the doctor's trick. Taking no notice of his professional injunction, he would then leave in high dudgeon, driving furiously, and jolting the Duchesse de Bourgogne or the Duchesse de Berry over the cobbled highway. Saint-Simon has related such a scene, which occurred at Marly, in front of the carp-basin. He cites it as an example of the revolting hard-heartedness of Louis XIV. But he does not add that Mme de Maintenon had set him on edge and irritated him by her ceaseless medical remonstrances and, as he called them, her " old woman's arguments ". To impede and hinder all outings and pleasures was her main object, not only for herself but for every one else as well.

Much as the King was annoyed with her, Mme de Maintenon was even more distressed with him and the official life which he compelled her to lead. The Court life of this home-loving bourgeoise was an endless torture. She wanted privacy, and her apartments at Versailles, Marly or Fontainebleau were, so to speak, common property. She ate, she was undressed, she was put to bed in the presence of

the King. Even in her bed, she knew not the solace of solitude. Two steps away, Louis and his ministers discussed current affairs. Only after their departure did the King, in the charmingly plain words of Saint-Simon, " go to a night-stool, return to her bed, bid her good-night, and go to supper. . ."

Nothing more uncomfortable than her rooms could be imagined. At Fontainebleau, the favourite was housed on the loggia over the Golden Door: dark drawing-room, small low-ceilinged chambers upon which the sun beat mercilessly and where she must have roasted in midsummer. Vainly did she beg her lord and master for shutters or blinds — this would have destroyed the artistic appearance of the *château,* which was the King's main concern. One should learn to suffer for beauty's sake. But the bourgeoise Maintenon would not resign herself to it. She wrote to the Princesse des Ursins: " With him, all must be majestic, magnificent and symmetrical. It is better to endure draughts from all the doors than that they should not be in line. . ." And she added with melancholy: " We must perish symmetrically! "

Nevertheless, she tried to give herself the illusion of a home by contriving various " resting places," as she called them, — at Saint-Cyr and Marly. Besides her *château* at Maintenon,

she had a house at Fontainebleau and one at Saint-Germain. She would slip away as often as she could and enjoy a few moments of peace. Saint-Cyr was her favourite retreat. But the King disliked her absences. In a general way, he required his retinue to reside at Versailles and he was especially annoyed by the inordinate interest which his wife took in Saint-Cyr. Everything brought her back to that beloved institution, where she could satisfy her mania for directing, scolding, teaching and playing the pedant. She blissfully buried herself in a mass of tiresome details and dull tasks, in a jumble of inspections and correspondence, and even regulated the number of muffins and crab-apples that the boarders should eat at recess. She forgot neither the cows nor the hens of the school, nor did she neglect the pupils' physical cleanliness, their itch and their lice, and the days when they should change their shirts. The King, although meticulous himself, despised all this useless fuss. He thought that a Queen of France could find worthier occupations. . .

There was nothing queenly about Mme de Maintenon, neither as to title nor in effect. She was the King's Companion, but her heart was in nowise royal. Saint-Simon tells us that " the poverty and lowliness in which she had lived had narrowed her mind and debased her

feelings. In all things, *she thought and felt in so small a way* that she always remained Mme Scarron and never could be anything else. Nothing could have been more repulsive than this meanness, coupled with such a glorious estate. . ." We must admit that her old enemy barely exaggerates. At any rate, her lack of understanding of the dignity of a nation and the grandeur of France was the main cause of the King's irritation. During the War of Succession, she was one of the worst calamity howlers. She wanted peace at any price, like her former friend Fénelon — the Fénelon who, after the Treaty of Utrecht, asked that Vauban's forts be demolished and that all French defensive works on the Northern and Eastern boundary-lines be razed to the ground. Mme de Maintenon did not possess the shrewd political mind of a Princesse des Ursins — had Louis XIV taken her advice, he would have signed the fall of France.

Devoutness was another cause of disagreement between them. She insisted on the King becoming devout. He was willing enough to be pious, but he thought that it was not meet for a King of France to be a tonsured monk. However, he endeavoured to please her, on that subject, as much as he could. Witness this significant little note: "I believe that I

may be able to attend compline at Saint-Cyr, if you approve, and return with you, at our leisure. To-day is a feast of the Holy Virgin and we might have litanies sung, which somewhat lengthen the prayers." So he agrees to attend endless compline! . . . At that, his pious consort was not satisfied. She wanted him to forbid, at Court, not only comedies but even concerts. This time, Louis XIV, passionately fond of music and fiddles, flew into a passion and the old Witch received this well-deserved answer: " Madame, the Queen, my Mother, who was very pious and received Communion twice a week, attended these concerts and saw no evil in them! "

The King's bitterest sorrow was to see that this woman, whom he had chosen freely as companion, associate and counsellor, did not take the slightest interest in the objects of his sole concern: the beauty and glory of France. He had lived with one purpose — to make France powerful, to build, to create wondrous palaces and gardens — and his wife took pleasure in saying that she cared nothing for the beauty of places and did not even notice it. There is no greater disillusionment, for a true lover, than to perceive that she whom he loves does not share all his loves. Such was the grief felt by Louis XIV. It was not long before their friendship, their mutual confidence, was

undermined by it. Add to this the thousand infirmities brought about by age, the unavoidable clashings of married life — and eventually the King had no illusions left. . .

Finally, the aged pair became very weary of their union. During the last illness of Louis XIV, Mme de Maintenon was literally exhausted. Her sole desire was to retire to Saint-Cyr and prepare herself in peace for the supreme moment. Long before that time, her letters had revealed unutterable dejection and despondency, and — more important still — an almost complete indifference toward the King.

As for him, always close-mouthed and reticent, it is more difficult to picture his true sentiments. It seems however that his feelings were the same as those of his old companion. On his death-bed when bidding her farewell, he said: "I have always loved and honoured you" — as if it were a fact which she might doubt. In truth, their mutual love had vanished long since: they simply bore with each other as tolerantly as possible.

The last chapter of the amorous life of Louis XIV had been written in the days of La Vallière — perhaps of Marie Mancini. His love had become sensuality with Mme de

Montespan, and mere friendship with Mme de Maintenon. But even this friendship eluded him. When he died, it is extremely probable that he had attained complete indifference to all worldly affections.

On the whole, all his love-affairs had disappointed him, as they had his mistresses. In fact, one would think that all were punished for having loved him. . . . How terrible were the last days of those unfortunate women! Marie Mancini, demented, gave to Europe the piteous spectacle of her vagabond madness, until her husband shut her up in a convent. After a martyrdom of ten years, Louise de La Vallière buried herself in an austere Carmelite monastery. Fallen and humiliated, the Montespan dragged out a desperate existence and died with the atrocious spectres of her crimes and the fear of Hell haunting her tortured soul. Mme de Maintenon, weary with thirty-five years of constraint, put down her mask and her burden only at the hour of her death. . . .

What tragic thoughts must have racked our worn and ailing Don Juan when he evoked their misery! To torture souls and drive them to despair, such was the record of his life — and his heart was wretchedly empty. Was it not right, after all, that they should suffer as he had suffered? He who is marked by Fate

must not be turned aside from his path — and he also is punished for straying.

But these errors of the King had been fleeting. At all times, another love had contended in his heart with human loves — that of Glory which, in his own words, " has all the delicate shyness of the most tender passions." All his thoughts centred in the State — " the common weal for which alone we have been brought into this world " — that is to say, France, his kingdom, its grandeur and prosperity. It may be definitely true that France was his only love. To all women of flesh he preferred his lady of glory, the France whom he had solemnly wedded according to the liturgy of coronation, when in the Basilica of Reims the officiating bishop had, on her behalf, circled his finger with a nuptial ring.

To his last day, all his thoughts were for the State. He served to the end, and on his dying bed he was still planning ways and means to ensure religious peace for his kingdom and avoid the perils which the minority of his heir might entail. . . . Only after having made these final provisions did he turn to God, fearlessly, but humbly, like a man whose conscience has nothing to reproach him, like a sovereign who, in spite of many errors and weaknesses, has sought nothing but the welfare of his people. The grief of this King on

Earth was that he had been unable to imitate, as well as he would have wished, the King in Heaven. Now, bent under the burden of age, he laid down his too heavy burden and, with the knowledge of a task well done, longed for eternal rest.

It is at least incontestable, whatever our opinion of him, that no other among our kings loved his work more, and more heartily accomplished it. This great lover of France spoke the truth indeed when he wrote, in his *Memoirs,* these lines which might be called the last testament of an impassioned life:

" When, in spite of ourselves, it happens that we fall into these aberrations (of love), we must at least, to mitigate their consequences, observe two precautions which I have always practised: the first is never to allow the time given to love to be prejudicial to our work . . . the second, more delicate and difficult, is to remain the absolute master of the mind, even when we give away our heart. . . . These precautions are necessary to fulfil properly one's duty to the State, but it is wise, to fulfil one's duty to God, as a Christian, to abstain from all such illicit relations, which are very seldom of an innocent nature. And at that last moment to which we are perhaps closer than we think, God will not ask whether we have lived like 'a man of the world,'

but whether we have kept His Commandments. . . ."

He, no doubt, had not always kept the divine Commandments — and he was the first to accuse himself. But he had always acted and lived, not only like a man of the world, but like a sovereign. He fulfilled to the end his duties as a King.

THE END

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